Table of Contents

1. Dreams
2. The meeting
3. First day of training
4. Hunting
5. Blazepaw meets Yellowfang
6. Nightmares
7. Training assessment
8. Spotify
9. Gathering
10. Moonstone
11. Rats!
12. Battle
13. Training lesson
14. Farewell Ravenpaw
15. The rescue
16. The plan
17. The end is the beginning
18. Memes I made cause I'm stupid
19. Tigerclaw and Blazefur caught in 4k
20. Book 2 - A Warrior at last!
21. Full moon
22. Finding out the truth
23. memes cuz why not
24. Author's note
25. Mission
26. Finding WindClan
27. WindClan found
28. Windclan home
29. Blazefur and Tigerclaw

Dreams

Chapter 1

It can only break you if you let it

[image]

♛♛♛

The sound of a gunshot made me jolt. I twist just at the right angle making the bullet hit my shoulder. I screamed in pain and collapsed, clutching my right shoulder. I flop down on my back lazily and looked up at Zach.

"You'll never win!" I spat at him.

"Oh, sweet Blazefur, you never give up do you?" He asked, kneeling beside me.

"NO!" I yowled in outrage, reaching for a gun beside me.

But he already kicked the gun away, stomping on my arm in the process. I choked on a sob, clutching my right arm to my chest. Then I couldn't do anything. Zach was nowhere to be seen. Pain. I just felt numb. I couldn't move. I couldn't see. I couldn't feel. I tried to feel something. I was stuck. I couldn't breathe. I just laid in the grass. The world around me had gone silent. Nothingness. Darkness. Just an endless black hole.

I sit up straight as my eyes shot open. I was still breathing heavily. Sweat dripped down my temple. I gulped trying to slow my increasing heart rate. I had to tell Rusty. I glance at the clock.

4:26

I run my hands through my wavy hair and grabbed my phone. I glance at my shoulder. No blood. Strange.

Meet me in my room.

I text him. He almost texts back immediately.

I'm coming ;)

I pace around my room repeating the same words in my head. It was just a dream. It wasn't real. It was fake. Dreams aren't real. Zach isn't evil. I'm not hurt. It was just a dream. Just a dream. Just a dream. Just a dream. It wasn't real. I had to repeat that over ten times before I actually believed myself. I look at the window hoping to see the familiar blaze orange hair. I start chewing on my fingernails to subside the worry that was creeping up on me. I heard a knock on the window. I rush over, unlock the window, and opened it.

"Thanks for coming," I sigh in relief.

"Anytime," Rusty smiled.

But by the way he looked, I knew he was troubled too.

"What's going on?" He asks.

"I had a dream. Eh, more like a nightmare," I grumble.

"I had one too," He murmured.

I go back to pacing and chewing my nails. I had enough things to worry about. Mom was in the hospital ill with cancer, my Dad is one inch closer to getting fired and I still haven't figured out what to wear for a function we're having at school.

"You shouldn't have this much on you're mind," Rusty grabs my hand.

"I know," I huff.

I flop down on the bed beside Rusty. Nothing made sense. I had loads of questions. Was Zach evil? Why did I get shot? Where was I? Where was my dad? Why was my name Blazefur? I sigh in frustration. Why did these things happen to me? I guess I'm just

lucky.

"What did you dream about?" I ask.

"I was hunting in the forest," He replied.

"Wow, that was such a great dream!" I clap sarcastically.

"Not funny," He punched my arm playfully.

I snicker. I just wondered why Zach would try to kill me. I groan and threw my pillow across the room. Nothing makes sense anymore. I sigh and covered my face with my hands. Rusty gave me a sympathetic look. He pulled me onto my feet and practically dragged me to the window.

"Come with me," He whispers.

I don't need to come with you when you're going to drag me! I wanted to say, but I held my tongue.

"Can I put some pants on first?" I ask gesturing to my bare legs.

"Oh, yeah," He replies cheesily.

I only had a long shirt that went down to my mid-thigh and underwear. I didn't feel uncomfortable with little clothes on around Rusty. I mean he was like a brother to me. When we met, at first I thought he was just some player waiting for a girl to spread her legs for him. Then I actually realized he was an amazing person. We dated... for a while... uh... then we figured out it was best if we were just friends.

I put some jeans and shoes on before heading towards the window. I climb out of the window carefully. If I woke my dad up, he would kill me. As soon as I got down, I hear Rusty bump his head against the window. He says a quiet 'Ow' then climbs down the rest of the way. I walk a little farther from my house.

"You okay?" He asks.

I shake my head and let out a desperate sigh.

"I don't know," I reply honestly.

I look down at the ground then look back up. I shuffle my feet uncomfortably. I feel someone put a hand on my shoulder. Since I have the instincts to attack people, I swing my fist in their face. Before I could punch him, Rusty grabs my hand and lowers it to my side.

"Sorry," I apologize cheesily, "Instincts."

"I can tell," He grumbles.

I twist my head towards the bushes again when I hear a snap. My bright blue orbs scan the forest ahead of us, searching for any danger. I block out the other noises and focus on the woods. I pull a knife out of my pocket still searching for danger.

"Julia, watch out!" Rusty yells as a body collides with mine.

I let out a battle cry and swung my fist. I jabbed him in the ribs, twisted his arm backward, and flung him face-first into a tree. All I heard was a sickening crack. I stare at him with narrowed eyes.

"Fucki-Damnit! What the hell dude? You just broke my nose!"

"Woops," I mumble, "It's not like I care,"

"Whatever, I'm Graypaw," I stood up and brushed his clothes.

Rusty stares at him with wide eyes. Whoever this dude is, Graywhatsit or whatever, he looked surprisingly nice. Instead of letting us speak, he continued to talk nonsense.

"I'm training to be a ThunderClan warrior." He says flexing his muscles.

Then he inspects me with curiosity.

"That was badass back there," He commented.

"Thanks?" I mutter.

Rusty remained silent. Graypaw shook his head looking back into the trees. I glance at the dawning sky. I clear my throat to get his attention. He snaps his head towards me.

"Well, it was very nice meeting you but it's almost five and I have to get home before my Dad wakes up." I turn to look at my house.

He turned his back towards us.

"You need to go! Quickly!" He hissed at us.

Rusty looked around, wondering how Graypaw knew any person was approaching. *Come on dumbass! Move your legs!* I wanted to yell at him. It was too late. I woman came strolling out of the bushes. She was beautiful. She had silver-gray hair that went to her shoulders, with a scar on the part of her neck.

"Bluestar!" His voice was shaky, void of any emotion.

"What's going on here?" I feel like I know her. I could already tell she was somebody important to Graypaw.

Graypaw's eyes stretched wide when a man with rich brown skin and bright gold eyes came shuffling out as well.

"You shouldn't go so close to this place!" He scolded sternly.

"I know, Lionheart, I'm sorry." He apologized sincerely.

Bluestar whipped her head towards us with interest. She tilted her head studying us as if we were kinds of flowers.

"Who are these people?" She asked inspecting me with focused eyes.

"They're no threat-" I cut Graypaw off quickly.

"Julia Peirce. This dumbass is Rusty," I roll my eyes pointing towards the weirdo.

Bluestar smiled. "You have spirit and incredible fighting skills. If Graypaw wasn't so heavy you might've given him some real injuries to worry about."

"Well, she did break my nose!" Graypaw spoke up.

Bluestar's mouth lifted into a Cheshire grin. "So she did,"

I change a confused glance with Rusty. Had she been watching us the whole time? She already spoke up again seeming to read my thoughts.

"We have been watching you both," Bluestar went on, "We wondered how you would deal with an intruder, Graypaw. You attacked them bravely."

He looked pleased by her praise.

"As for you," She continued looking at Rusy and I thoughtfully, "You guys worked together as a team to fight off Graypaw. Sharp eyes and working as a team is good to use."

I smirk feeling my chest glow with pride. Rusty nods his thanks.

"I have been wondering how you would perform out here, beyond this place. We patrol this border frequently, so I have often seen you sitting on your boundary, staring out into the forest. And now, at last, you have dared to place your feet here." Bluestar stared at me thoughtfully.

"I want to join ThunderClan!" I blurt.

Bluestar and Lionheart exchange glances. Was there something going on between the two Warriors? Lionheart looked thoughtful.

"You're taking a big risk when you say that. You would have to take on the responsibility of taking care of your Clanmates. Taking care of the elders' and queens' bedding, making sure there's enough fresh kill, fighting other clans off your territory. It's very dangerous sometimes." He looked at me with uncertainty.

"I mean, well yeah." I shrugged.

"Well, it seems you are very eager to learn about Clan life," She says quietly, "Would you like to join ThunderClan?"

She didn't need to ask me that. I already knew the answer. I nod vigorously. Then realization hits me. My father was at home always worrying about Mom and I. When I wake up, I'll never see her again. I pushed the thought away quickly before I could cry. I was so focused on my own thoughts that I hadn't heard Rusty say he would join as well.

"Very well. Then tomorrow at sun high Lionheart will be waiting." Then as if nothing happened she turned away briskly.

Lionheart stared at me for a minute.

"Come on Lionheart. Tigerclaw will be waiting!" Bluestar called through the bushes.

He grunted and turned around signaling Graypaw. He hurried after Lionheart without a word. Rusty and I both parted our ways without a word. When I got to bed it was already five-thirty.

"Might as well get thirty more minutes of sleep," I mutter closing my tired eyes.

~Time skip~

"JULIA! GET UP!" My dad's screaming made me fling out of bed.

I scramble to get my phone.

"ELEVEN-THIRTY!?!?!" I scream.

"YES, ELEVEN-THIRTY!" My dad screams back.

"Ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod!" I yell ripping my shirt off.

After I got changed I went into the bathroom brushed my teeth, did my hair, and packed all of my hygiene stuff. Hygiene is important kids. After that, I went out into my room, sloppily rolled up my clothes, shoved them in my bag, and grabbed my shoes. I didn't bother putting make-up on. I didn't need it anymore. I didn't need my phone or watch. I was almost free. I grabbed my sketchbook, journal, and a photo of my family. It was all I had to remember them by. I wrote a sloppy note saying that I was leaving. Surely my

dad would understand, right?

Bow and arrows, sword, Daggers. All good to go. I pulled on my boots and jacket then headed towards the door.

"Where are you going, young lady?" He asks in a stern voice.

"To Rusty's house for homework. You know us high schoolers get a lot of paperwork!" I smile acting innocent.

His face softens. "Of course pumpkin! Love you!"

I press a kiss on his cheek praying no tears would spill. "Love you too Dad," I murmur heading out the door.

After he closes the door, I burst into a run. Just as I saw Lionheart I stopped.

"I'm not late, am I?" I ask bending over to catch my breath.

He looked up at the sun.

"Just in time," He smiled.

I stand up straight. When I do, I notice he was on a horse. There were two others with him. Both looked young.

"We're riding?" I ask stroking the one's mane.

"Yep. The camp is a long way from here. It would be hard to carry all that stuff on foot." He observed my heavy bag.

"What are their names?" I ask.

"This brown stallion is Buckshot, The brown one I'm riding is Lancer, and that black mare is Midnight." He nodded toward the black horse.

"I thought you could ride her. She's fierce and free-spirited like you. You guys could be a good team." He smiled slightly as she pawed at the grass impatiently.

"She seems skittish," I observe when she jumps at the smallest of

sounds.

She started pawing at the grass again. She nickered softly bobbing her head up and down. She seemed very playful though.

I put one foot in the stirrup then pulled myself up the rest of the way. Just as I put my foot in the stirrup, I hear Rusty blunder through the bushes.

"Am I late?" He asks taking a deep breath.

"Not really. Can you tell if anyone else is here?" He asks.

I strain my ears only to be met by silence. I could hear Rusty breathing.

"Cover your mouth," I order impatiently.

He covers his mouth. Then I heard it. There was breathing coming from the bushes. Then I heard a hoove stomp.

"Over there," I nod towards the bushes.

"Very well," I hear someone purr.

A second person strode into the clearing. He had snow-white hair with amazing yellow eyes.

"This is Whitestorm. He's one of the senior warriors," Lionheart nodded to Whitestorm.

"I've heard a lot about you," He looked amused, "And your fighting skills,"

I felt my face heat up with embarrassment. Rusty of course is void of any emotion.

"Come, we can speak more once we are in the camp," Lionheart ordered, and, without pausing, he and Whitestorm trotted away into the undergrowth.

Their pace barely slowed as they led him over fallen trees that they

cleared in a single jump, but which Rusty and I had to jump over by cantering. They passed through sharply fragrant pine trees, where they had to jump across deep gullies churned up. One gully was half-filled with slimy, foul-smelling water. I tried my best not to gag. After we jumped over that Lionheart halted.

"We're very close to our camp now," Lionheart whispered.

I strained to hear any movements of life. It smelt like a fire was burning.

"There's a fire," I whisper looking at the gray smoke rising above the treetops.

Whitestorm nodded. "Follow me!" He led the way nimbly down the boulders to the bottom of the ravine and pushed his way through a thick patch of gorse.

As we walk in I feel the burning stares of everyone. There were huge cabins beside each other. It was amazing. Two women were watching some kids laugh and play around in the dirt. Some people were in groups laughing or talking to each other. Others had laid down in the soft grass enjoying the basking sun.

I smile as I saw the kids giggling and chasing each other. Something warmed my heart.

"The care of our kids is shared by all of the queens," Lionheart explained. "All people serve the Clan. Loyalty to the Clan is the first law in our warrior code; a lesson you must learn quickly if you wish to stay with us."

"Here comes Bluestar," Whitestorm said, shifting his position.

"They're here," She looked pleased.

Whitestorm responded, "Lionheart was convinced they'd back out,"

Before I could stop myself, I blurt, "I wouldn't!"

"Neither would I," Rusty agreed.

"I'm glad to hear that!" Lionheart smirked.

"So it is agreed?" Bluestar looked at Lionheart and Whitestorm.

They both nodded in agreement. "Then I shall announce their arrival to the Clan." Bluestar leaped up onto the boulder and yowled, "Let all those old enough to catch their own prey join here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting."

As she called people started to gather beneath the rock. They settled themselves beside each other, waiting for Bluestar's announcement. Rusty looked relieved when he saw Graypaw's face along with a girl that has tortoiseshell hair. Beside her is a boy with black hair.

"ThunderClan needs more warriors," She said. "Never before have we had so few apprentices in training. It has been decided that ThunderClan will take in some outsiders to train as warriors...." She trailed off.

The murmurs of shock and disapproval swept throughout the clan. Bluestar yowled to be heard again.

"I have found some people who are willing to become apprentices of ThunderClan." Her voice was firm and commanding; nobody would dare to speak against her word.

"Lucky to become an apprentice!" Somebody caterwauled.

Well. I was wrong. Bluestar ignored him and continued to talk.

"Lionheart and Whitestorm have met these young teenagers, and they agree with me that we should train them with the other apprentices."

All of the eyes were on us. If someone was going to attack me they made the wrong choice. I knew right then and there, I couldn't turn back. I had to make myself belong.

People start yelling,

"Where do they come from?"

"Which Clan do they belong to?"

"They look so strange! I don't think they dress like the other clans!"

But one jackass shouts, "Look at the thing around her wrist! She's a human!" *Human?* "Once a human, always a human. This Clan needs wild-born warriors to defend it, not another soft mouth to feed."

All the people howl in agreement. I clench my fist. Lionheart bent down to whisper in my ear, "Do you back down from a challenge?"

"Never," I clench my teeth.

I take off my bag and sweatshirt. I hear Rusty mutter, "Oh shit," before I lunge at that guy.

He stumbles in surprise but gets back up quickly. I take my right knee my kick him in the ribs. Hard. He swings his fist at me. I duck under then jump onto his back. I grabbed his hair and pulled back as hard as I could. I let go of him so when I hit the ground I could roll out of the way. I slammed into the ground, all the air left my body. I forced myself to roll as quickly as I could.

Panic swept through me. It was hard to breathe. I could only take in small gasps of air. I felt Rusty beside me.

"It's okay, you're just stunned." I coughed twice. I stumbled to get up.

"If I had known you were pretty I would've fought him," I hear Rusty suck his teeth nervously.

Oh, buddy, you made the wrong choice saying that. I clench my fists and kicked him in the jewels again.

"Call me pretty one more time," I say stalking off.

I ignored the pain I felt when I breathed. Bluestar looks at me strangely before murmuring to herself, "You both look like a brand of fire in the sunlight,"

"From this day forward, until they have earned their warrior names,

these apprentices will be called Firepaw and Blazepaw in honor of their flame-colored hair." Everybody circled us.

They congratulated us,

"Firepaw! Blazepaw!"

"Hey, Firepaw!"

"Welcome, young Blazepaw!"

Firepaw and I soaked in our praises happily. This was it, this was what I've always wanted. Graypaw skipped up to us excitedly.

"Firepaw and Blazepaw are awesome names!" I nod smiling slightly.

"Where's that guy?" Firepaw asks.

"That guy is Longtail. He probably went to the Spottedleaf's den to get his wound treated. Spottedleaf is our medical person; Not bad-looking either. Younger and a lot prettier than most—" He explained.

"Lucky your watch snapped when it did. Longtail is a young warrior, but I can't imagine him being beaten by a human!" He growled. Longtail is jackass 1 and that guy is jackass 2.

"Now Darkstripe," Graypaw hissed to us under his breath, "Is neither young nor pretty...."

Firepaw opened his mouth to agree with Graypaw when he was interrupted by a warning yowl from an old man sitting at the edge of the clearing.

"Smallear smells trouble!" He hissed now alert.

I barely had time to look around before a young boy crashed through the bushes and into the camp. He had jet-black hair with emerald eyes.

Graypaw gasped. "That's Ravenpaw! Why is he alone? Where's Tigerclaw?"

His hair was ruffled and dusty, and his eyes were wild with fear. He stood there trying to get his breath.

"Who are Ravenpaw and Tigerclaw?" Firepaw whispered.

"Ravenpaw is Tigerclaw's apprentice," Graypaw explained quickly.

Bluestar leapt back onto the highrock looking down on Ravenpaw.

"What has happened?" She sounded calm, but her eyes told a different story.

He took a deep breath and shouted, "Redtail is dead!"

The meeting

[image]

Chapter 2

Hitting rock bottom doesn't mean you can stay there

[image]

♛♛♛

Terrified screams and yowls rose from the clan. Ravenpaw swaggered on his feet. "There w-was a dispute between RiverClan a-and us," He stuttered.

"Oakheart had Redtail pinned and-" His eyes rolled to the back of his head before fainting.

A woman with golden hair hunched beside him, checking his pulse. "He's breathing! Somebody get Spottedleaf!" She shrieked.

I recognized the same girl that sat beside Graypaw earlier. She checked his pulse as well. "He's fine, Goldenflower. He just needs some bandages." She got up and went into a small cabin on the far side of the camp.

The silence was broken by a painful screech. A muscular man tattered through the entrance carrying a lifeless body on his shoulders. Even though it was a time of crisis, I thought he looked devilishly handsome. I pinched myself.

Don't be so absurd! I scold myself once more.

"How did this happen?" Bluestar demanded.

His voice was thick with grief. He looked shaken. "He died with honor, killed by Oakheart. I couldn't save him, but I managed to take Oakheart's life while he was still gloating over his victory."

Several people gathered around his body, fixing his hair and straightening his clothes. Wails of grief came from the circle while others sat there in shock. Some were murmuring to him.

"What are they doing?" I ask.

"His spirit has left to join StarClan, but the Clan will talk with Redtail one last time." He answered briefly.

"StarClan?" Firepaw asked.

"It's the tribe of heavenly warriors that watch over all Clan people. You can see them in Silverpelt." He explained.

"Silverpelt?" I ask more confused than ever.

"Silverpelt is that thick band of stars you see each night stretching across the sky. Each star is a StarClan warrior." He explained stepping forward to share his last words with Redtail.

Bluestar pushed her way through the crowd and murmured the last few words to him. She stroked his hair gently, then stood up.

"Redtail was a brave warrior. His loyalty to ThunderClan could never be doubted. I always relied on his judgment, for it bore witness to the needs of the Clan, and was never swayed by self-interest or pride." She sat down on her knees with her head bowed.

Others followed her suit, while some stood with the heads bowed.

"How long will Bluestar stay with him?" I ask.

"Probably the whole night. He's been her deputy for many months." He replied.

Tigerclaw stood up and stalked over to his wounded apprentice.

Spottedleaf was wrapping bandages around his arm with her hands.

"Spottedleaf," He grunted, "How is he? Do you think you can save him? I spent a lot of time training him up!" Every time he spoke it came out like grunts or growls.

"Yes, I suppose it would be a waste for him to die at his first battle, eh?" She teased slightly.

Tigerclaw ignored her. His eyes hardened. "Will he live?" He demanded.

"Of course. He just needs rest," She answered dabbing ointments on his other wounds.

Tigerclaw snorted looking down at the motionless boy. He kneeled beside him and jabbed his finger in Ravenpaw's shoulder. "Come on then! Get up!" He growled.

Ravenpaw didn't move.

"Look at those muscles!" Firepaw hissed.

Suddenly those muscles were my new favorite things.

"Too right!" Replied Graypaw with feeling. "I know *I* wouldn't want to get into a fight with him!"

"Not so fast, Tigerclaw!" Spottedleaf placed her hand on Tigerclaw's arm and gently moved it away. "This apprentice needs to keep as still as possible until the cut has healed. We don't want him opening his wound by jumping about trying to please you. Leave him alone."

I found myself holding my breath as I waited for Tigerclaw's reaction. I guessed that few people dared to give orders to the warrior like that. He stiffened and seemed about to speak when Spottedleaf narrowed her eyes teasingly, "Even you know better than to argue with a healer, Tigerclaw."

Tigerclaw's eyes flashed at the girl's words. "I wouldn't dare argue with you, dear Spottedleaf," He purred. He turned to leave and caught sight of Graypaw, Firepaw, and I.

"Who's this?" He asked Graypaw, towering above us.

"They're the new apprentices," Graypaw announced proudly.

"They look like humans," He snorted.

Firepaw opened his mouth to speak but I stomped on his foot to shut him up. "We are," I point out, "But we're training to be warriors."

Tigerclaw looked at me with sudden interest. "Ah, yes. Now I remember. Bluestar mentioned that she had stumbled across some stray humans. So she's actually going to try you out, is she?"

Firepaw sat up taller as if trying to impress the warrior. "That's right," He said respectfully.

Tigerclaw never removed his gaze from me. "Then I shall watch your progress with interest."

He took one last glance at all three of us before stalking away. "Did he like us?" Firepaw asked.

"I don't think Tigerclaw likes any apprentices!" Whispered Graypaw.

Just then Ravenpaw stirred. "Has he gone?" He mumbled.

"Who? Tigerclaw?" Replied Graypaw, trotting toward him. "Yep, he's gone."

Just then Spottedleaf swatted at us with her hands. "Shoo, shoo. Ravenpaw needs to rest," She pushed us away quickly.

"I'll show you guys around. You already know that's Highrock," He nodded towards the big smooth rock, "Bluestar always addresses the Clan from there. Her den is down there," He pointed towards the smaller cabin beside it.

"The warriors sleep over here," Graypaw went on.

We looked through the window to see some bedrooms. There was a living area and it appeared to have a fireplace.

"The senior warriors sleep upstairs where it's the warmest," He explained, "They usually share their fresh-kill over by that clump of nettles. The younger warriors eat nearby. Sometimes they are invited to join the senior warriors for eating, which is a big honor."

"What about the other Clan people?" I asked, fascinated but feeling rather overwhelmed by all the traditions and rituals of Clan life.

"Well, the queens share warrior quarters when they work as warriors, but when they are expecting kids, or nursing them, they stay in a cabin near the nursery. The elders have their own place on the other side of the clearing. Come on, I'll show you."

We walked over to another cabin. Graypaw knocked on the door. We heard a croaky response, "Come in,"

We walked in to see four elderly people lounging in the living room where the fireplace was. "Hello, youngster," One of the elders greeted Graypaw.

"Hello, Smallear," Greeted Graypaw, nodding respectfully.

"These must be our new apprentices. Firepaw, Blazepaw isn't it?" Said a second man.

"That's right," Firepaw replied, copying Graypaw's polite nod.

"I'm Halftail. Welcome to ThunderClan," He said.

Another elder narrowed her eyes. "You look like Fawnstep," She croaked.

"I-I don't know who Fawnstep is," I stutter.

"Sorry about One-eye. Sometimes she sees things," Halftail apologized.

"What?!?! Speak up!" She yelled.

"Nothing," Smallear replied.

"It was nice meeting you," Firepaw says politely.

"Nice meeting you too youngster!" Dappletail called as we headed out the door.

Bluestar's voice called from the Highrock. Redtail's body still lay in the clearing below, pale gray in the fading light. "A new deputy must be appointed," she meowed. "But first, let us give thanks to StarClan for the life of Redtail. Tonight he sits with his fellow warriors among the stars."

Silence fell as all the people looked up into the sky, which was beginning to darken as evening crept over the forest.

"And now I shall name ThunderClan's new deputy," Bluestar continued. "I say these words before the body of Redtail, so that his spirit may hear and approve my choice."

I looked at Tigerclaw. I couldn't help noticing the hunger in the big warrior's amber eyes as he stared up at the Highrock.

"Lionheart," meowed Bluestar, "Will be the new deputy of ThunderClan."

I was curious to see Tigerclaw's reaction. But the warrior's face revealed nothing as he moved to congratulate Lionheart with a nudge so hearty that it almost pushed the golden-haired man off balance.

"Why didn't she make Tigerclaw deputy?" Firepaw whispered to Graypaw.

"Probably because Lionheart has been a warrior longer, so he has a lot more experience," Graypaw murmured back, still looking up at Bluestar.

Bluestar spoke again. "Redtail was also a mentor to young Dustpaw. Since there must be no delay in the training of our apprentices, I shall appoint Dustpaw's new mentor immediately. Darkstripe, you are ready for your first apprentice, so you will continue Dustpaw's training. You had a fine mentor in Tigerclaw, and I expect you to pass on some of the excellent skills you were taught."

Darkstripe swelled with pride as he showed his acceptance with a

solemn nod. He strode over to Dustpaw and rather awkwardly hugged his new apprentice. Dustpaw smiled respectfully, but his eyes were still dull with grief for his lost mentor.

Bluestar raised her voice. "I shall keep a vigil with Redtail's body tonight before we bury him at sunrise." She jumped down from the Highrock and walked over to lie beside Redtail's body once more. Many of the other people joined her, Dustpaw and Smallear among them.

"Should we join them?" I whisper.

Graypaw shook his head. "Only the people closest to him will stay with him the whole night."

I nod pulling my jacket closer to my body as the wispy wind touched my skin. Graypaw notices.

"Come on. There's a fire inside the apprentice's den to keep us warm."

"How many apprentices are there?" Firepaw asked as we walked towards another cabin,

"Not as many as usual—just me, you, Blazepaw, Ravenpaw, Dustpaw, and Sandpaw." He replied.

The door to the apprentice den swung open revealing a cute girl with blonde hair. She caught sight of me and Firepaw and scowled.

"So here comes the new apprentices!" She said, narrowing her eyes. Then she mutters something under her breath.

"If you have something rude to say, say it to our faces!" I growl, losing my temper.

She rolls her eyes. "You'll have to excuse Sandpaw," Apologized Graypaw. "I think she must have a tick stuck somewhere. She's not usually this bad-tempered."

"Assholes!" Spat Sandpaw crossly.

"Hold on," The deep voice of Whitestorm sounded behind the apprentices. "Sandpaw! As my apprentice, I expected you to be a little more welcoming to these newcomers."

"Sorry, Whitestorm," She muttered, sounding not a bit sorry.

"I just didn't expect to be training with *humans*, that's all!"

"I'm sure you'll get used to it, Sandpaw," Says Whitestorm calmly. "Now, it's getting late, and training starts early tomorrow. You three should get some sleep." He gave Sandpaw a stern look, and she nodded obediently. As he walked off, she spun around and vanished into the cabin, sniffing once more as she brushed past Firepaw.

"She seems... nice," I say awkwardly.

"It's okay to call her snarky. She's not the nicest person you'll meet." Graypaw murmured.

He waved his hand inviting us to follow him. Inside there was a couch in front of a crackling fire. Sandpaw stomped upstairs and slammed the door. I clear my throat. Graypaw opened two bedroom doors. The first had a bed that was lined with leather. A bear carpet and a huge window revealing the beautiful moonlit trees.

"Did you make all of this?" I ask, amazed by all the items in the room.

"Well, a long time ago our ancestors built this." He replied.

I flopped down on the bed and swatted at them with my hands. "Shoo. This is my room now." Firepaw looked crestfallen.

"I wanted this room!" He whined.

"The other room looks the same. I'm sure you'll be fine," I scoff.

He huffs and stomps after Graypaw. I smile in victory and unpacked my bags.

First day of training

Chapter 3
She would rather walk alone in
Darkness than follow
anyone elses shadow.
R.G. Moon

[image]

♛♛♛

"Hey, Blazepaw, wake up!" Graypaw's voice broke into my dream.

"Training begins at sunrise. Dustpaw and Sandpaw are already up," Graypaw added urgently.

I stretched sleepily, then remembered: today was my first day of training. I leaped to my feet and walked into the bathroom. My drowsiness evaporated as the warm water droplets streamed down my skin. Once I got done, I braided the hair into a french braid and picked out a pair of ripped jeans with a leather jacket.

When I open the door, Graypaw and Firepaw were waiting by the fireplace. "I've just spoken to Lionheart. Ravenpaw won't be training with us till his wound is better. He'll probably stay at Spottedleaf's cabin for another day or two. Dustpaw and Sandpaw are on hunting duty. So Lionheart thought you, Firepaw and I could train with him

and Tigerclaw this morning. We'd better hurry, though," he added.

"They'll be waiting!"

Graypaw led Firepaw and I quickly through the gorse entrance of the camp and up the side of the rock-strewn valley. As we climbed over the crest of the ravine, a cool breeze ruffled our hair. Fat, white clouds raced across the blue sky overhead. I felt fierce joy well up inside me as I followed Graypaw down a tree-shaded slope and into a sandy hollow.

Tigerclaw and Lionheart were indeed waiting, sitting a few yards apart on the sun-warmed sand.

"In the future, I expect you both to be punctual," Tigerclaw growled.

I roll my eyes. "If these dorks hadn't kept me up all night I might've come earlier," I glare at Firepaw, who looked at the ground as if finding it very interesting.

"You have not yet been assigned a mentor, Firepaw, Blazepaw," Says Lionheart, "For now, Firepaw will share his training with Graypaw and you," He pointed at me.

"Will share your training with Ravenpaw. But since he's not here, you and Tigerclaw will do one on one lessons." I almost sighed at the fact I might be training with Tigerclaw alone.

Shit! I did it again! Focus on training Blazepaw. Stop mooning over a guy that's way older than you.

"Come," Says Tigerclaw impatiently. "Today we are going to show you the edges of our territory so that you know where you will be hunting and what boundaries you need to protect. Graypaw, it won't do you any harm to remind yourself of the Clan's outer limits."

Without another word, Tigerclaw boarded his horse and cantered away. Graypaw, Firepaw, and I hopped on our horses and scurried after him. The trees were thick in this part of the forest, birch and ash trees cast shadows over the ground.

"There a hiking rail up there. Tell me what you see, Firepaw." Lionheart questioned

"Some people were hiking up here but the footprints don't look fresh," Firepaw murmured.

"Good," Praised Lionheart.

The trees beyond were pine. They grew tall and straight, row after row. It was easy to walk silently here. The ground was thick with layers of dead needles, which made squishing sounds beneath the horses' hooves. There was no undergrowth here to hide in, and I sensed the tension in the others as they stalked unprotected between the tree trunks.

"Humans put trees here," Says Tigerclaw. "They cut them down with foul-smelling creatures, which spew enough fumes to make a kid go blind. Then they take the fallen trees to the Treecut place that lies near here."

I stopped and tried to listen for the trucks, but all was silent. "The Treecut place will be silent for a few moons more, until the time of Greenleaf," explained Graypaw, noticing my pause.

"You mean Summer and months?" I ask.

"Greenleaf, Summer, Moons, and months, all the same," He replied grinning.

"The humans lie in that direction," Explained Tigerclaw. "No doubt you can see it, Firepaw, Blazepaw. Today, however, we will head the other way." My name rolled off his tongue smoothly.

Eventually, we reached another path that marked the far edge of the pine forest. They quickly crossed over into the safe bushes of the oak woods beyond. But I still sensed anxiety in the others.

"We're approaching RiverClan territory," Whispered Graypaw. "The Sunningrocks are over there." He nodded to the rocks lying in the sun.

I felt the hair on my neck stand up. This was where Redtail had

been slain.

Lionheart stopped by a flat gray rock. "This is the boundary between ThunderClan and RiverClan territory. RiverClan rules the hunting grounds beside the great river," He said.

"Breathe deeply, Firepaw, Blazepaw." The pungent smell of fish, sweat, and blood hit my nostrils making me gag.

I was surprised how different it smelled from the warm scents of the ThunderClan camp. And I was also surprised to realize just how familiar and comforting the ThunderClan scents seemed to me already.

"That is the smell of RiverClan," Tigerclaw growled beside me. "Remember it well. It will be strongest at the boundary because their warriors will have marked the trees along here."

"We'll follow this boundary line, as it leads straight to Fourtrees," Lionheart said. He set off quickly, away from the Sunningrocks, followed by Tigerclaw. Graypaw, Firepaw, and I trotted after them.

"What is Fourtrees?" Firepaw panted.

"It is where the territories of all four Clans meet," Replied Graypaw. "There are four great oaks there, as old as the Clans-"

"Be quiet!" Ordered Tigerclaw. "Don't forget how close we are to enemy territory!"

I wasn't even talking, I bit back the snide comment.

By the time we reached Fourtrees, Firepaw looked completely out of breath. I could tell he wasn't used to traveling so far and so fast. He looked quite relieved when Lionheart and Tigerclaw led them out of the thick woods and stopped at the brow of a brush-covered slope. The clouds had cleared, and the wind had dropped. Below, in the dazzling sunlight, stood four enormous oaks, their dark green crowns reaching almost to the top of the steep slope.

"As Graypaw told you," Says Lionheart to Firepaw and I, "This is Fourtrees, where the territories of all four Clans meet. WindClan

governs the high ground ahead of us, where the sun sets. You won't be able to catch their scent today—the wind is blowing toward them. But you'll learn it soon enough."

"And ShadowClan holds power over there, in the darkest part of the forest," Added Graypaw, flicking his head sideways. "The elders say that the cold winds from the north blow over the ShadowClan people and chill their hearts."

"How many Clans are there?" I ask.

"Five. ShadowClan, RiverClan, WindClan, ThunderClan and StarClan." Tigerclaw grunted.

Lionheart glanced briefly at Tigerclaw before he continued. "The four Clans do come together peacefully, in a Gathering each moon. Here-" He bent his head toward the four mighty oaks below, "Is where they meet. The truce lasts for as long as the moon is at its fullest."

"Then there must be a meeting very soon?" I suggested, remembering how bright the moonlight had been the night before.

"Indeed there is!" Answered Lionheart, sounding impressed. "Tonight, in fact. The Gatherings are very important because they allow the Clans to come together in peace for one night. But you must understand that longer alliances bring more trouble than they're worth."

"It is our Clan loyalty that makes us strong," Tigerclaw says in agreement. "If you weaken that loyalty, you weaken our chances of survival."

"That makes sense. My mom said that loyalty is everything when people trust you," I blink back tears just thinking of the last time I saw her.

She was in the hospital too sick to move. Two years ago she had gotten sick with breast cancer. Now she was in the hospital fighting for her life. That's what it was so hard to write that letter to my dad saying this is what I wanted and that I would be safe.

"Are you okay?" I snapped out of my thoughts and looked at everybody's concerned faces.

"Yeah. Just thought of something," I said, not realizing how somber I had gotten.

Tigerclaw didn't look convinced but said nothing more.

"Come on," Says Lionheart, turning his horse around. "Let's keep moving."

We paced along the ridge of the valley where Fourtrees stood. Now we were heading away from the sun as it began to sink in the afternoon sky. We crossed the stream at a place where it was narrow enough to leap over in one jump.

A new scent hit my nose making me gag. I make-shifted a mask with my shirt and scrunched my nose up.

"What is that awful smell?" I ask, my voice muffled from the shirt.

"ShadowClan," Answered Tigerclaw grimly. "We're traveling along their border. Keep your wits about you, Blazepaw. Fresher scents mean that a ShadowClan patrol is in the area."

I swallowed trying to keep the bile from rising in my throat.

I peered through the trees ahead. They seemed to be getting thinner, letting in a broadband of sunlight.

"Are we at the edge of the woods?" Firepaw asked.

A rumbling was getting louder, a ceaseless roar that made the ground tremble.

"This is the Thunderpath," Says Tigerclaw.

I followed as Lionheart led them toward the edge of the forest. Just ahead, I could see the shiny cars speeding down the highway.

"It keeps ShadowClan from crossing onto our territory," Explained Graypaw.

"It's time we returned to camp," Says Lionheart. "You have seen all our boundaries now. But we'll avoid Snakerocks, even though the way around is longer. An untrained apprentice would be easy prey for an adder, and I expect you are getting tired, Firepaw, Blazepaw."

I bet I could kill a snake with a bow and an arrow just like that. My mom had trained me to sharpen my senses, to hunt, to fight. It was all part of clan life. Now that I actually know more about clan life, I'm starting to wonder if my mom was once a clan person. I never knew her side of the family nor her name. When I did the stupid family tree thing for my school half of it was blank because my mom didn't want to tell me her parents' names. And when Dappletail said I looked like Fawnstep, it confused me more than ever.

We turned around and headed back towards the camp.

~Time Skip~

The dewy scents of the evening filled the air as I made my way through the gorse entrance into the ThunderClan camp. Fresh-kill was waiting for me. Firepaw and Graypaw took their share from the pile that lay in a shady part of the clearing and carried it to the tree stump outside their quarters. Dustpaw and Sandpaw were already there, munching hungrily.

"Hi, there, humans," says Dustpaw, narrowing his eyes scornfully at Firepaw and I.

"Enjoy the food we caught for you?"

"Who knows, you might even learn to catch your own one day!" Sneered Sandpaw.

"Are you two still on hunting duty?" Asked Graypaw innocently. "Never mind. We've been patrolling our territory borders. You'll be glad to know all is safe."

"I'm sure the other Clans were terrified when they saw you three coming!" Yowled Dustpaw.

"They didn't even dare show their faces," Retorted Graypaw, unable

to hide his anger.

"Well, we'll ask them tonight when we see them at the Clan Gathering," Says Sandpaw.

"Are you going?" Firepaw blurted out.

"Of course," Replied Dustpaw loftily.

"It's a great honor, you know. But don't worry; we'll tell you all about it in the morning." I couldn't help feeling a twinge of envy that Dustpaw and Sandpaw were actually going to meet the other Clans tonight.

I nudge Firepaw with my arm while they were distracted.

"We can catch our own food," I whisper to him.

"I don't think any deer are lingering around here." He scoffed.

"But birds are," I smirked and got my bow and arrows out.

Firepaw picked up a rock and flung it at a tree. I let go and watched the arrow hit the bird. I smile in victory. Sandpaw and Dustpaw watched with their mouths full and wide eyes.

Sandpaw only clapped sarcastically. "What was that supposed to do?"

I took an apple out of my satchel and handed it to Sandpaw.

"I want you to throw this right above your head when I count to three. Got it?" I ask her sweetly.

She shrugged. I walked ten feet back. In the middle of the camp. Great.

"One." I got out my arrow, positioning it on my bow.

"Two," I brought the bow to my face and drew back the string.

"Three," She threw the apple, I let out a breath, and let go.

The arrow went flying. It successfully hit the apple *and* hit the tree behind Sandpaw. I saw her swallow.

I walked over, picked up the thrush, and began to skin it just like Mom had taught me. I cooked it over the fire until it was done.

"Wing or leg?" I ask Graypaw.

"Wing!" He says hungrily snatching the wind off of the thrush.

I giggle and started chomping on a leg. Firepaw had the other wing and shared another leg with Graypaw.

"Nothing is better than smoked meat," I couldn't contain my moan as I took another bite.

"I know right? I surprised you lived sixteen years with gross chewy stuff," He scrunched up his nose in disgust.

A loud call from Bluestar made Firepaw and I look up. I watched several of the Clan warriors and elders gather in the clearing. It was time for the Clan party to leave for the Gathering. Dustpaw and Sandpaw leaped to their feet and trotted off to join the other people.

"Bye, you three," Called Sandpaw over her shoulder. "Have a nice, quiet evening!"

The assembled people stalked out of the camp entrance in single file, with Bluestar at the head. Her hair glowed like silver in the moonlight, and she looked calm and confident as she led her Clan to the brief truce between old enemies.

"Have you ever been to a Gathering?" Firepaw asked Graypaw wistfully.

"Not yet," replied Graypaw, crunching loudly on a bone. "But it won't be long now; just you wait. All the apprentices get to go some time."

The three of us ate the rest of our meal in silence. Then, tired after the long trek, we pushed our way into the den. Once I got in my

room I brushed my teeth and hair and put on a silk nightgown that went to my knees. I curled in my bed and blew out the candle. Then I allowed the sleep to engulf me.

~The next morning~

The following morning, Graypaw, Firepaw, and I arrived early at the sandy hollow.

We had crept out before Sandpaw and Dustpaw woke. I had been eager to hear about the Gathering, but Graypaw had dragged me away.

"You'll hear all about it later if I know those two," he had said.

It promised to be another warm day. And this time Ravenpaw came to join us. Thanks to Spottedleaf, his wound was healing well. Graypaw played around, scooping leaves into the air and leaping after them. Firepaw watched his eyes shown amusement. Ravenpaw sat quietly at one side of the hollow, looking tense and unhappy.

"Cheer up, Ravenpaw!" called Graypaw. "I know you don't like training, but you're not usually this miserable!"

The rustle of Lionheart and Tigerclaw warned us of their approach, and Ravenpaw said hastily, "I suppose I'm just worried about my shoulder getting hurt again."

At that moment, Tigerclaw emerged from the bushes, closely followed by Lionheart.

"Warriors should suffer their pain silently," Growled Tigerclaw. He looked Ravenpaw straight in the eye. "You need to learn to hold your tongue."

Ravenpaw flinched and dropped his eyes to the ground.

"Tigerclaw's a bit grumpy today," Graypaw whispered into my ear.

I covered my mouth to smother my giggles.

Lionheart glanced at us sternly and announced, "Today we are

going to practice stalking. Now, there is a big difference between creeping up on a rabbit and creeping up on a mouse. Can any of you tell me why?" Ravenpaw seemed to have taken Tigerclaw's comment to heart and was holding his tongue.

"Because a rabbit will smell you before he sees you, but a mouse will feel your steps through the ground before he even smells you." I blurt.

"How do you know that?" Tigerclaw's heated gaze rested on me.

"My mom taught me," I say softly.

Something changed in his eyes. It was like he suddenly knew me. Lionheart's expression changed too. He looked beyond shocked. If there were another word for shocked I would use it.

Tigerclaw leaned into Lionheart and whispered, "We should talk to Bluestar later."

Lionheart nodded. I gulp. Had I done something wrong? Did they know something I didn't? A million questions buzzed in my brain like bees. Tigerclaw cleared his throat.

"That's correct. Now, what would I do if I was hunting a deer?" He asked.

"Step lightly?" Firepaw suggested.

"Quite right, Firepaw." Lionheart nodded approvingly, "Let's try it!"

Firepaw, Graypaw, and Ravenpaw got their bows and arrows out, bent their knees, put one foot in front an another, making sure to step lightly. I did the same. But they were doing it wrong. they were putting their weight on their heels. Instead, I stepped on my toes making sure my elbow was at a forty-degree angle, and the arrow was pointed at the ground.

"Nicely done, Graypaw!" Says Lionheart as the two apprentices began to move forward stealthily.

"Keep your rear down, Ravenpaw, you look like a duck!" Spat

Tigerclaw.

"Well, it's obvious you've known nothing but softness!" growled Tigerclaw. "You stalk like a lumbering human! Do you think dinner is going to come and lie down on your plate and wait to be eaten?" Firepaw sat up quickly as Tigerclaw spoke.

"His pace and forward movement will come later, but his crouch is perfectly balanced," Lionheart pointed out mildly.

"Which is better than Ravenpaw, I suppose," complained Tigerclaw. He cast a scornful look at the black-haired boy. "Even after two moons of training, you're still putting all your weight on your left side."

I couldn't stop myself from blurting, "His injury is bothering him, that's all!"

Tigerclaw whipped his head around and glared at me. "Injuries are a fact of life. He should be able to adapt. Even you, Blazepaw, have learned something this morning. If Ravenpaw picked up things as quickly as you, he'd be a credit to me instead of an embarrassment. Imagine being shown up by a human!" He spat angrily at his apprentice.

"Well, I'm more lopsided than a one-legged badger," Says Graypaw, breaking off from his careful stalking to stagger comically across the clearing. "I think I'll have to settle for hunting stupid voles. They won't stand a chance. I shall just wander up to them and sit on them till they surrender."

"Concentrate, young Graypaw. This is no time for your jokes!" says Lionheart sternly.

"Perhaps you might focus your mind better if you try out your stalking for real."

All of us looked up brightly.

"I want each one of you to try catching real prey," Says Lionheart.

"Ravenpaw, you look beside the Owltree. Graypaw, there might be

something in that big bramble patch over there. Firepaw, follow the rabbit track over that rise; you'll find the dry bed of a winter stream. And you, Blazepaw, can look near Great sycamore but don't go too close to Snake Rocks." He warned.

Fierpaw scoffed. "I'm not sure *she'll* be the one running away from the snakes," He muttered.

I stomp on his foot. He glares at me before stalking away. I smirked and headed for Great sycamore. All of us bounded away, even Ravenpaw finding some extra energy for this challenge. As soon as I got to the Owltree, I listened to the tiniest rustle of leaves. When I heard a 'Snap' I slowly turn my head towards the noise. Just between the thick trees, I saw antlers. I knew it was a big buck. I an arrow out of the quiver, put it up to my bow, and pulled back.

Right behind the shoulder, Mom's words echoed in my mind.

I aimed and let go. The arrow hit the buck right behind the shoulder and it sank to the ground. I grin in victory. I gutted the buck; which wasn't pretty and dragged it to the Sandy hollow. I was a true ThunderClan apprentice now.

Hunting

Chapter 4

I am a Warrior not because I always win. I am a warrior because I always fight

[image]

♛♛♛

Early-morning sunlight streamed down onto the forest floor as I roamed in search of prey. Two moons had passed since I had begun my training. I felt at ease in this environment now. My senses had been awoken and educated in the ways of the woods. Right now I was searching for prey, as I had been educated by Tigerclaw "The clan must be fed first!"

I was determined to bring back at least one piece of prey; even if it was my only task. I got used to clan life. In the evening's everybody would cluster around the campfire and share food and stories. Tonight I was planning on telling the clan what a pain it was to go to sleep at Firepaw's house. In the mornings I would gather fruit and vegetables for the elders to cook. While staying in ThunderClan, I had grown closer to Midnight. I tamed her and I only rode her. I feared that she wouldn't except other riders so I only rode her.

I looked around and spotted a rabbit hopping among the leaves looking for food. I pulled my arrow back and aimed at the rabbit. Suddenly there was a loud rustle in the ferns behind me. The rabbit's ear twitched and It scrambled away. Well, shit. Whatever had ruined my first good chance of catching prey would have to pay.

A growl rose in my throat as I began doubling back in a wide circle. I set my bow and arrows down and rolled up my sleeves. This asshole better pay. I heard the undergrowth rustle again. It was louder now, off to one side. I edged closer. I could see the ferns moving, but the fronds still hid the enemy from view. A twig snapped with a sharp cracking noise. As soon as it moved again I lunged at it.

I let out a battle cry and swung my fist in its face. It huffed and rolled over so it could pin me. I kicked it in the jewels, rolled over, and punched it again for good measure.

It yelped. "Wa-ah! What'sat?"

"Uh! Graypaw?" I recognized the astonished voice and caught my friend's familiar smell, but I was too fired up to loosen my grip.

"Ambush! Ahhhh!" Spat Graypaw, not realizing that the person gripping onto his back was me. He rolled over and over in an attempt to dislodge his attacker.

"Uufff-ff!" I rolled with him, squashed, and flattened beneath the heavy body.

"It's me—Blazepaw!" I yowled as I struggled to pull free. Rolling away, I sprang to my feet and gave myself a shake, which rippled all the way along my body.

"Graypaw! It's me," I repeated.

"I thought you were an enemy warrior!" Graypaw rose to his feet. He winced and shook himself.

"It felt like it!" I grumbled, testing to see if my shoulder were okay.

"You've raked me to shreds!"

"Sorry," I mumbled again. "But what was I supposed to think, with you creeping up on me like that?"

"Creeping up!" Graypaw's eyes were round with indignation. "That was my best stealth crouch."

"Stealth! You still stalk like a lopsided badger!" I teased.

"I'll show you lopsided!" The two of us leaped at each other and began rolling over and over in a play-fight.

Graypaw swiped at me with a hefty hand and my head buzzed with stars.

I shook my head to clear it and then launched a counterattack. I managed to get in a couple of hand strikes before Graypaw overpowered me and held me down. I let my body go limp.

"You give up too easily!" says Graypaw, loosening his grip. As he did so, I sprang to my feet, firing Graypaw off back and into the undergrowth.

I leaped after him and pinned him to the ground. "'Surprise is the warrior's greatest weapon,'" I crowed, quoting one of Lionheart's favorite phrases.

Graypaw seemed unbothered by his second defeat of the morning. It was too fine a day for a bad temper.

"So how're you getting on with your task?" he asked. I sat up. "I was doing just fine till you came along! I was about to catch a rabbit when your noisy trampling frightened it off."

"Oh, sorry," says Graypaw.

"That's okay. You didn't know," I smiled.

"Anyway," I continued, "shouldn't you be heading to meet the patrol on the WindClan border? I thought you had to give them a message from Bluestar."

"Yeah, but there's plenty of time. I was going to do a little hunting first. I'm starving!"

"Me too. But I've got to hunt for the Clan before I can hunt for myself."

"I bet Dustpaw and Sandpaw used to swallow a shrew or two when

they were on hunting duty," snorted Graypaw.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they did, but this is my first solo assignment...."

"And you want to do it right; I know." Graypaw sighed.

"What is the message from Bluestar, anyway?" I asked, changing the subject.

"She wants the patrol to wait at the Great Sycamore until she joins them at sunhigh. Seems that some of ShadowClan have been prowling around. Bluestar wants to check things out."

"You'd best get going then," I reminded him.

"The WindClan hunting grounds aren't too far from here. There's plenty of time," answered Graypawconfidently. "And I suppose I should help out after losing you that rabbit."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I'll find another. It's such a warm day, there should be quite a few out and about."

"True. But you still have to catch them." Graypaw peeled of a hanging fingernail. "You know, that could take you until way past sunhigh, maybe even until sunset."

I nodded without enthusiasm as my belly gave a rumble. I would probably have to make three or four hunting trips before I had caught enough prey. Silverpelt would be in the sky before I got a chance to eat. Graypaw ran his hand through his hair. "Come on; I'll help you get started. I owe you that, at least. We should be able to catch a couple of rabbits before I have to get going."

I followed Garypaw upstream when I saw a red blur. "Do you see that?" I ask.

"Fox," He whispered, suddenly alert.

It came out of the bushes. I thought foxes weren't the prettiest things but not the ugliest things either. The fox hadn't noticed us so we moved on.

As I had predicted, hunting was good that day. Before long, Graypaw had caught a small bunny and I had caught a thrush. I quickly took its life. No time to practice killing techniques today; there were too many hungry mouths waiting back at camp.

Suddenly a squirrel broke cover. I burst into action.

"After it!" I called, pelting at full stretch over the springy woodland floor with Graypaw at my heels. We slid to a halt as the squirrel scampered upward into a birch.

"Lost it!" Graypaw growled in disappointment. Panting, the two of us stopped to catch our breath. The acrid stench that hit our mouths and noses surprised us.

"The Thunderpath," I said. "I didn't realize we'd come so far."

The two of us edged forward to peer out of the forest at the great, dark path. It was the first time we had been here alone. A trail of noisy cars growled along the hard surface, their dead eyes staring straight ahead.

"Yuck!" Graypaw snorted. "Those monsters really stink!"

I nodded in agreement. The choking smells made my throat sting.

"Have you ever been across the Thunderpath?" I asked.

"Come on," hissed Graypaw edgily. "Let's get out of here!"

Before I turned around I saw a pair of eyes staring at me.

"Blazepaw!" Graypaw called again.

I shook my head and followed Graypaw as he leaped away back into the forest. Once we were a safe distance from the Thunderpath, Graypaw stopped to catch his breath.

"I think I saw a ShadowClan warrior," I said. "In the forest on the other side of the Thunderpath."

"A ShadowClan warrior!" echoed Graypaw, his eyes wide. "Really?"

"I'm pretty sure."

"Well, it's a good thing that monster came past when it did," retorted Graypaw. "Where there's one ShadowClan warrior, there's more, and we're no match for them yet. We'd better get out of here." He looked up at the sun, which was almost directly overhead.

"I'd better get a move on if I want to meet that patrol on time," he said. "See you later." He sprang away into the undergrowth, calling as he went, "You never know; Lionheart might let me come and help you with the hunting once I've delivered this message."

I watched him go. I envied Graypaw, wishing I were off to join a warrior patrol. But at least I'd have something to tell Dustpaw and Sandpaw when I returned to camp. Today I had seen my first ShadowClan warrior.

Blazepaw meets Yellowfang

Chapter 5

"Stop trying to prove yourself, Fireheart,"
Blazefur to Fireheart

[image]

I retraced my steps and headed back toward the stream. I thought of those eyes burning from the darkness of the ShadowClan territory. It still disturbed me.

Fierpaw put his hand out for me to stop. Then I hear mumbling, "Stupid Brokenstar. Stupid ShadowClan. STUPID! STUPID! STUPID!"

She sounds, old, cranky, and hungry. Instantly a growl rumbled in Firepaw's throat. Dropping low, Firepaw moved forward, heading toward the sound. Then he paused in puzzlement. The sounds had stopped and all was silent.

Suddenly she burst through the bushes and threw herself and Firepaw. I let out a battle cry and flung myself on top of her. We forced ourselves to go limp, relaxing our muscles as if in submission, and let out a pretend howl of alarm.

The woman opened her mouth to give a triumphant yowl. "Ah, puny apprentices. Easy prey for Yellowfang," she hissed.

Wait til' she makes the next move, My instincts whisper.

Then when she bit down on Firepaw's shoulder, I dragged her off and flung her at the gorse bush.

"Not so easy prey, huh?" Firepaw asked, shaking himself.

She growled under her breath. Yellowfang hissed defiance as she

tore herself free from the clinging branches. "Not bad, young apprentices," she spat back. "But you'll need to do a lot better!"

We stood our ground. Firepaw lifted his chin. "You're on ThunderClan hunting grounds. Move on!" He hissed at her.

I rolled my eyes. That's not how you handle an intruder Firepaw.

"Move one more step and I'll display your head at our camp entrance!" I snarl.

"Feisty," She croaked.

I lunged at her but Firepaw held onto me, restraining me from moving.

"Somebody needs to control her temper," Yellowfang rolled her eyes.

"I would say the same for you!" She narrowed her eyes but said nothing.

"Enough talk," Firepaw spat.

Yellowfang seemed to sense the change in us. Her fierce orange eyes sparked with new respect. Dipping her head and breaking eye contact, she started to back off. "No need to be hasty, now," she purred in a silky tone.

With a battle cry, both Firepaw and I lunged at Yellowfang. She screeched and we locked into a fight. Fierpaw punched her so hard that he almost knocked her out. She collapsed and shook her head.

She coughed and wheezed trying to catch her breath. Firepaw frowned. She seemed very weak. Now I didn't really want to hurt her. Up close, the message of desperation and weakness, and the aching void of the woman's hunger, was almost painful. Somethings stirred deep inside of me. Something very unwarriorlike; pity. I could tell Firepaw was thinking this through as well.

I tried not to dwell on this instinct—I knew my loyalty must be to my Clan—but I couldn't shake free of it. "You speak from your

heart, young Blazepaw." Lionheart's words echoed in my head once more. "This will make you a stronger warrior one day." Then Tigerclaw's warning rang in my ears: "Or it might make her give in to human weakness right at the moment of attack."

When I wasn't paying attention, she lunged at us but her leg gave away. Her eyes were dull as she hissed up at us, "If I weren't so hungry and tired, I'd have shredded you into dust." The woman's mouth twisted in pain and defiance. "Finish me off. I won't stop you."

Both Fireapw and I hesitated. I might've been fierce when it came to battle training, but I never wanted to think of killing someone. Perhaps, in the heat of battle, I would, but a mercy killing, in cold blood? This was something very different.

"What are you waiting for?" Yellowfang taunted. "You're dithering like humans!"

"I'm an apprentice warrior of ThunderClan!" Firepaw snapped.

Yellowfang narrowed her eyes. She'd seen Firepaw flinch at her words and she knew she'd hit a nerve. "Ha," she snorted. "Don't tell me ThunderClan is so desperate they have to recruit humans now?"

"ThunderClan is not desperate!" hissed Firepaw.

"Prove it then! Act like a warrior and finish me off. You'll be doing me a favor." Firepaw and I stared at her. I wouldn't be goaded into killing this miserable creature. I felt my muscles relax as curiosity pricked me. How had a Clan person gotten in such a state? ThunderClan elders were looked after better than kids!

"You seem in an awful hurry to die," I say.

"Yeah? Well, that's my business, mousefodder," Yellowfang snapped.

"What's your problem? Are you trying to talk me to death?" Her words were brave, but I could tell the hunger and sickness that was coming off the other person in waves. She was going to die anyway if she didn't eat soon. And since she could hardly hunt for herself,

perhaps I should kill her now. The three looked at each other, uncertainty in all of our gazes.

"Wait here," Firepaw ordered at last.

"Are you kidding? I'm going nowhere." She grunted, limping painfully toward a patch of soft heather.

Firepaw disappeared into the undergrowth. I sigh and put my hands on my hips. He could be so blockheaded sometimes. When he came back he had a rabbit in his hand. He started a small fire and started cooking it. When it was all the way cooked, he handed it to Yellowfang.

"Look, if you don't want this..."

"Ah—no," Yellowfang meowed hastily. "I do want it."

Firepaw and I watched the woman rip open the prey and start to swallow it down. My own hunger rose up and my mouth filled with water. I knew I shouldn't even be thinking about eating. I still had to take back enough prey for the Clan, but the fresh-kill smelled delicious.

"Mmm-mm." A few minutes later, Yellowfang gave a huge sigh and flopped onto her side. "First fresh-kill I've had for days."

Both Firepaw and I eyed the remaining prey. Firepaw scrambled to eat the last pieces.

"Idiot!" I cried smacking him upside the head. As he finished the last pieces dread filled me. Yellowfang tensed.

"Shhh...warriors coming."

These were ThunderClan warriors, confident enough in their own territory not to care about the noise they made. I could hear the hooves pounding nearer. Firepaw licked his lips and looked at me guiltily.

"The Clan must be fed first!" Lionheart's voice rang through my head once more. Then I looked at Yellowfang and the fresh pile of

rabbit bones that lay beside her.

Yellowfang growled in defiance at the approaching hooves but I could sense her panic. The woman struggled to her feet. "So long. Thanks for the meal." She tried to limp away on one leg and then winced in pain. "Nuh! This leg's stiffened up while I've been resting."

Now it was too late for her to run. Silent shadows slipped out of the trees and in a heartbeat, the ThunderClan patrol had encircled Firepaw, Yellowfang, and I. I recognized them: Tigerclaw, Darkstripe, Willowpelt, and Bluestar, all of them lean and hard-muscled.

Graypaw followed close behind. He bounded out of the bushes and stood beside the warrior patrol. Firepaw said a hasty greeting to his Clan. But only Graypaw returned it. "Hi, Firepaw!" he called out.

"Silence!" Tigerclaw growled. I glanced at Yellowfang and groaned inwardly. Just great. Just *great.*

"Firepaw, Blazepaw?" Bluestar's question was cool and measured. "What have we here? An enemy warrior—and recently fed, by the smell of Firepaw." Her eyes burned into us, and we dropped our heads.

"She was weak and hungry..." Firepaw began.

"And what about you? Was your hunger so bad that you had to feed yourself before you had gathered pray for your Clan?" Bluestar went on. "I assume that you have a very good reason for breaking the warrior code?"

We were not fooled by the leader's soft tone. Bluestar was furious—and rightly so. We lowered our heads to the ground. Before we could speak there was a loud hiss from Darkstripe. "Once a human, always a human!"

Bluestar ignored Darkstripe and looked instead at Yellowfang. Suddenly she looked surprised. "Well, well, Firepaw and Blazepaw! It seems you have captured us a ShadowClan person. And one I

know well. You are ShadowClan's healer, aren't you?" she said to Yellowfang. "What are you doing so far into ThunderClan territory?"

"I was the ShadowClan healer. Now I choose to travel alone," hissed Yellowfang.

"Yellowfang!" Tigerclaw said mockingly. "It looks like you have fallen on hard times if you can be beaten by these apprentices!" Now Darkstripe spoke. "This old person is no use to us. Let's kill her now. As for these humans, they have broken the warrior code by feeding an enemy warrior. They should be punished."

"And *you* shouldn't order our leader around like that!" I snarl.

Darkstripe snarled back. Fireheart wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back.

"Keep your knives in, Darkstripe," Bluestar purred calmly. "All the Clans speak of Yellowfang's bravery and wisdom. It may help us to hear what she has to say. Come; we'll take her back to camp. Then we'll decide what to do with her—with Firepaw and Blazepaw. Can you walk?" she asked Yellowfang. "Or do you need help?"

"I've got one good leg!" snapped Yellowfang.

Firepaw and I saw that Yellowfang's eyes were glazed with pain, but she seemed determined not to show any weakness. We noticed a look of respect flicker across Bluestar's face before the ThunderClan leader turned and slowly led the way through the trees. The other warriors took up positions on either side of Yellowfang, and the patrol moved off, carefully keeping pace with their lame prisoner.

Firepaw and Graypaw fell in step together at the back of the group while I walked beside Tigerclaw. I strained my ears to hear their conversation.

"Have you heard of Yellowfang?" Firepaw hissed to Graypaw.

"A bit. Apparently, she was a warrior before she became a medicine person, which is unusual. I can imagine her as a *rouge*, though. She has lived her whole life in ShadowClan."

"I might end up a rouge once Bluestar has finished with me," Firepaw said.

"Bluestar is very fair," Graypaw reassured him. "She won't throw you out. She certainly seems pleased to have such an important ShadowClan person as a prisoner. I'm sure she's not going to make a fuss about your feeding the poor old mange-bag."

"But they keep moaning about prey being scarce! Oh, why did I eat that rabbit?" Firepaw sounded ashamed.

"Well, yeah." Graypaw nudged his friend. "That was stupid. You really broke the warrior code there, but no person is perfect!"

Firepaw didn't answer but trekked onward. I sucked in an unsteady breath. Surely it wouldn't happen, right? Tigerclaw seemed to notice my nervousness and gently nudged my side.

"Don't worry," he said in a low voice, "Firepaw and Graypaw are talking bullshit. Bluestar's not gonna kick you out. It's all in your head. And you didn't do anything in the first place."

As if that would reassure me. I only gave him a small close-lipped smile.

~Time Skip~

As the patrol passed the sentries who guarded the camp entrance, the rest of ThunderClan came running to welcome their warriors home. Queens, kids, and elders crowded on either side. They peered curiously at Yellowfang as she was led into the camp. Some of the elders recognized the old woman. Word spread quickly through the Clan that this was ShadowClan's healer, and a steady jeering hum rose up around them. Yellowfang seemed deaf to the taunts. Firepaw and I couldn't help admiring the way she limped with dignity through the corridor of stares and insults. We knew she was in a great deal of pain, and hungry in spite of the rabbit Firepaw had caught for her.

When the patrol reached the Highrock, Bluestar nodded toward a log in front of it. Yellowfang followed the ThunderClan leader's

silent command, sinking gratefully onto the wood. Still ignoring the hostile stares around her, she began examining her wounded leg.

I noticed Spottedleaf emerge from her corner. She must have seen the presence of an injured person in the camp. I watched the crowd part to let the young woman through.

Yellowfang glared at Spottedleaf and hissed, "I know how to take care of my own wounds. I don't need your help."

Spottedleaf said nothing but nodded respectfully and stepped back.

Some of the people had been out hunting, and fresh-kill was brought for the returning warriors to eat. They each took some food and carried it away to the nettle patch to eat it. Then the other Clan people crowded forward to take their own share.

My stomach growled with hunger as the scents of cooking meat hit my nose. Firepaw was also looking at the fresh-kill pile like it was a huge piece of Halloween candy. I could tell he longed for a morsel, but didn't dare to take anything from the pile. He had broken the warrior code. He probably guessed that this meant he was forbidden his share in the fresh-kill.

I looked over at the Highrock where Bluestar was sharing words with Tigerclaw. But the blue-haired girl and her senior warrior were busy murmuring at one another in low tones. I wondered if they were talking about Firepaw and I. Desperate to know his fate, I strained my ears to hear what they were saying.

Tigerclaw's yowl sounded impatient. "It's just too dangerous to bring an enemy warrior into the heart of ThunderClan! Now that she knows the camp, even the youngest ShadowClan kid will hear of it! We will have to move!"

"Calm down, Tigerclaw," Bluestar hummed. "Why should we move? Yellowfang says that she is traveling alone now. There is no reason for ShadowClan to hear of it."

"Do you really believe that? What on earth was that foolish human thinking of?" Tigerclaw spat.

"But think for a moment, Tigerclaw," says Bluestar. "Why would the ShadowClan medicine person choose to leave her Clan? You seem to be afraid that Yellowfang will share our Clan secrets with ShadowClan, but have you thought about how many ShadowClan secrets she might share with us?"

Tigerclaw's shoulders began to relax at Bluestar's words. The warrior nodded briefly and then stalked off to take his share of the fresh-kill.

Bluestar remained where she was. She looked out across the clearing, where some of the younger kids were fighting and tumbling playfully in the dust. Then she stood up and began to walk toward Firepaw and I. My heart lurched for Firepaw. What was she going to say to him? But Bluestar walked straight past us. She did not even glance at us; her eyes were clouded with unknown distant thoughts.

"Frostfur!" she called out as she approached the nursery.

A woman with pure white hair and dark blue eyes walked stood up and greeted Bluestar. Inside, the noise of crying grew louder.

"Hush, kids," sang the white-haired girl reassuringly. "I won't be long." Then she turned to her leader. "Yes, Bluestar? What is it?"

"One of our apprentices has seen a fox in the area. Warn the other queens to guard the nursery carefully. And make sure all kits less than a season stay inside the nursery until our warriors have driven it away."

Frostfur nodded. "I will pass on the warning, Bluestar. Thank you." Then she turned and squeezed back into the nursery to quiet the crying kids.

I felt a pang in my chest. I'd always wanted kids of my own. My mother used to say that it was both difficult and amazing at the same time. I swallowed back tears. That was *before* she was in the hospital sick with cancer. Then I remembered all the fighting lessons I had with her. All the hunting lessons. All the memories.

"Are you okay?" Firepaw's voice broke into my thoughts.

"What?" I ask.

"You're crying," He frowned cupping my cheek.

"Just thinking about Mom," I murmur.

Firepaw wiped my tears away and planted a kiss on my temple. "She'll be okay,"

I sniffled and buried my head in his shoulder. Like I said before Firepaw is like the brother I never had. Whenever I cried he'd hold onto me and tell me it was okay. Whenever I got hurt he'd sweep me off my feet and carry me most of the day. He was the only brother I had ever known.

My stomach grumbled again, and this time Firepaw heard. He grins cheesily. Finally, hunger drove us towards the fresh-kill pile. Graypaw was with Ravenpaw, wolfing down a small finch beside the tree stump. He saw us approach the pile and flicked his head encouragingly. We were about to pick our prey when Tigerclaw strolls up behind us.

"Not for you," he growled, "You didn't bring back any prey. The elders will eat your share. Take it to them."

Firepaw picked up his share and I was about to pick up mine when Tigerclaw stopped me. Firepaw waited as well.

"You go," he muttered to Firepaw.

Fierpaw cast me an uneasy glance, and I nodded telling him to go. He gave Tigerclaw an 'If you touch her, I'll kill you' glare before stalking towards the elders.

"Why have you been crying?" Tigerclaw's eyes soften.

What the hell is wrong with this guy? First, he's all 'I hate humans!' and 'Oh I'm so cool that I have two goons following me everywhere!' then he's 'Why are you crying?'.

"It's none of your business," I snap picking up a piece of prey.

I walked back to my seat beside Firepaw.

"What did he want?" he asked.

"He wanted to know why I was crying,"

"What did you say?" his eyes hardened.

"I said it was none of his business."

Firepaw frowned but said nothing more. Graypaw looked at us for the first time since we got back to the camp.

"Has Bluestar mentioned your punishment yet?" he asked.

"Not yet," Firepaw replied gloomily.

Graypaw narrowed his eyes sympathetically and said nothing.

Bluestar's call sounded across the clearing. "Let all those people old enough to catch their own prey join together for a meeting of our Clan."

"Come on," says Graypaw.

He leaped up. Ravenpaw and Firepaw followed him as he scampered over and nudged his way forward into a good position.

"I'm sure you have all heard about the prisoner we brought back with us today," Bluestar began. "But there is something else you need to know." She glanced down at the raddled woman who lay very still beside the Highrock.

"Can you hear me from there?" she asked.

"I may be old, but I'm not deaf yet!" Yellowfang spat in reply.

Bluestar ignored the prisoner's hostile tone and continued. "I'm afraid I have some very grave news. Today I traveled with a patrol into WindClan territory. The air was filled with the scent of ShadowClan. Almost every tree had been sprayed by ShadowClan

warriors. And we met no WindClan people even though we journeyed deep into their heartland."

Her words were met with silence. I saw confusion in the faces of the Clan people.

"Do you mean ShadowClan has chased them out?" called Smallear hesitantly.

"We can't be sure," Bluestar says. "Certainly the scent of ShadowClan was everywhere. We found blood, too. There must have been a battle, though we found no bodies from either Clan."

A shocked yowl rose from the crowd in a single voice. I felt the people around me stiffen with shock and fury. Never before had one Clan driven another from its hunting grounds.

"How can WindClan have been driven out?" One-eye croaked hoarsely. "ShadowClan is fierce, but WindClan is many. They have lived in the uplands for generations. Why have they been chased out now?" She shook her head anxiously.

"I don't know the answers to any of your questions," says Bluestar. "It is well-known that ShadowClan has recently appointed a new leader, following the death of Raggedstar. Their new leader, Brokenstar, gave no hint of any threat when we met him at the last Gathering."

"Perhaps Yellowfang has answers?" snarled Darkstripe. "After all, she is of ShadowClan!"

"I am no traitor! Nothing would make me share the secrets of ShadowClan with a brute like you!" growled Yellowfang, glaring aggressively at Darkstripe.

The ThunderClan warrior moved forward, eyes closed to slits, ready for a fight.

"Stop!" yowled Bluestar.

Darkstripe immediately halted in his tracks, even though Yellowfang goaded him on with blazing eyes and a ferocious hiss.

"That's enough!" Bluestar growled. "This situation is too serious for us to be fighting among ourselves. ThunderClan must prepare itself. From this moonrise onward, warriors will travel in larger groups. Other Clan members will remain close to the camp. Patrols will travel the boundary edges more frequently, and all the kids must stay in the nursery."

The people below her nodded in agreement.

Bluestar continued. "Our need for warriors is our greatest obstacle. We shall get around this by speeding up the training of our apprentices. They need to be ready even sooner to fight for our Clan."

I saw Dustpaw and Sandpaw exchange a thrilled glance. Graypaw was gazing up at Bluestar, his eyes wide with excitement. Ravenpaw just shuffled his feet anxiously. The black-haired apprentice's wide eyes showed worry rather than excitement. I clenched my sweaty palms. Firepaw was trying to keep himself from smiling.

Bluestar went on. "Two young teenagers have been sharing mentors with Graypaw and Ravenpaw. By teaching them, I shall speed up the training of all three apprentices." She paused and looked down at her Clan. "I shall take on Firepaw and Blazepaw as my own apprentices."

I gaped at her in shock. The clan leader was going to be my mentor!

Beside him, Graypaw gasped, unable to hide his surprise. "What an honor! It's been moons since Bluestar had an apprentice. Usually, she trains only the kids of deputies!"

Then a familiar voice rose from the front of the crowd. It was Tigerclaw. "So Firepaw is to be rewarded, not punished, for feeding an enemy warrior when they should have been feeding his own Clan?"

"Firepaw is my apprentice now. I will deal with him," answered Bluestar. She stared into Tigerclaw's fierce eyes for a moment before lifting her head to address the whole Clan once more.

"Yellowfang will be allowed to stay here until she has recovered her strength. We are warriors, not savages. She is to be treated with respect and courtesy."

"But the Clan cannot support Yellowfang," Darkstripe protested. "We have too many mouths to feed already."

"Yeah!" Graypaw whispered into Firepaw's ear. "And some of them are bigger than others!"

"I don't need anyone to care for me!" spat Yellowfang. "And I'll split open anyone who tries!"

"Friendly, isn't she?" Graypaw murmured.

Firepaw nodded in silent agreement. There were muffled voices from the other warriors as they grudgingly recognized the enemy warrior's fighting spirit.

Bluestar ignored the murmuring. "We shall kill two prey with one blow, as it were. Firepaw, as punishment for breaking the warrior code, it will be your responsibility to care for Yellowfang. You will hunt for her and tend her wounds."

Firepaw answered, "Yes, Bluestar,"

Mocking yowls came from Dustpaw and Sandpaw. "Good idea!" hissed Dustpaw.

"And hunting!" added Sandpaw. "That sack of bones is going to need feeding up!"

"Enough!" Bluestar interrupted them. "I hope Firepaw will find no shame in caring for Yellowfang. She is a healer, and she is his elder. For those reasons alone they should respect her!" She shot a sharp glance at Sandpaw and Dustpaw.

"And there is no humiliation in caring for another person when it is unable to take care of itself. The meeting is over. I would like to speak to my senior warriors alone now." With that, she jumped down from the Highrock and marched toward her den.

Lionheart followed her. The other Clan people began to move away from the Highrock. One or two congratulated Firepaw and I on being chosen as Bluestar's apprentice; others mockingly wished Firepaw luck looking after Yellowfang. Firepaw felt so dazed by Bluestar's announcement that he just nodded blankly.

Darkstripe strolled up to us with a smirk. "Well, I hope you'll think twice about bringing strays back into the camp next time," he sneered. "Like I said, outsiders always bring trouble."

Nightmares

Chapter 6

Its hard to wake up from a nightmare when you aren't asleep

[image]

"I'd go and see to Yellowfang if I were you," whispered Graypaw, as Darkstripe strode away. "She's doesn't look very happy."

We glanced over at the old woman. She was still lying beside the Highrock. Graypaw was right; she was glaring at us.

"Well, here goes," Firepaw says. "Wish me luck!"

"You'll need the whole of StarClan on your side for this one," answered Graypaw. "Call out if you need a hand. If she looks like she's going to have you, I'll sneak up behind her and whack her on the head with a stiff rabbit."

I couldn't help but giggle. Firepaw smiled and trotted off towards Yellowfang. I followed. Obviously, she wasn't in a good mood.

"Stop right there, humans!" she hissed a warning and showed her teeth.

"You can call me what you like," says Fierpaw wearily. "I'm just following Bluestar'sorders."

"You are pets, though, aren't you?" Yellowfang wheezed.

There was less fire in her voice, although her spite was as strong as ever. "Was your mother a human? Was your father a human?"

"Yes, they were." Firepaw looked down at the ground. It was bad enough that members of our own Clan still viewed us as an outsider. I nodded as well.

Yellowfang seemed to take his silence as an invitation to go on. "Human blood is not the same as warrior blood. Why don't you run home to your parents now instead of looking after me? It's humiliating, being fussed over by a lowborn person like you!"

My patience ran out quickly. I snarled, "You'd still feel humiliated if I were warrior-born. You'd feel ashamed whether I was a precious girl from your own Clan or a wretched human that had picked you off the ground." I clenched and unclenched my fists. "It's the fact that you need to rely on any person that you find so humiliating!"

I carried on fiercely: "You're just going to have to get used to being cared for until you are well enough to look after yourself, you spiteful old bone bag!"

Yellowfang made a wheezing sound, and for a second I thought she was dying. But she threw her head back and howled with laughter.

"You have spirit, human," Yellowfang croaked, stopping at last. "Now, I'm tired and my leg hurts. I need sleep and something to put on this wound. Go and find that pretty little medicine person of yours and ask her for some herbs. I think you'll find a goldenrod poultice would help. And, while you're at it, I Wouldn't mind a few poppy seeds to chew on. The pain is killing me!"

Stunned by her change of mood, I turned quickly and sprinted toward Spottedleaf's den. Once I got there I told Spottedleaf the list of herbs Yellowfang had listed. Might as well help Firepaw.

"I've got most of those in my den," replied Spottedleaf. "I'll fetch some marigold leaves too. If she dresses her wound with that, it'll keep off any infection. Wait here."

"Thanks," I say as she disappears through the entrance.

Spottedleaf emerged from the gloom and dropped a bundle folded in leaves. "Tell Yellowfang to go easy on the poppy seeds. I don't want her to deadpan the pain entirely. A little pain can be useful, as it will help me judge how well she is healing."

I nod my thanks once again and set off. Tigerclaw was sitting outside the warriors' den, watching me closely. As I trotted over to Yellowfang, carrying the herbs, I could feel the amber-eyed stare burning the hair on the back of my neck. I turned my head and looked at Tigerclaw curiously. The warrior narrowed his eyes and looked away.

I dropped the bundle beside Yellowfang.

"Good," she says. "Now, before you leave me in peace, find me something to eat. I'm starving!"

That night I had tossed and turned. It's like my body refused to sleep. When I did go to sleep I had the same nightmare about Zach. This time it made a little more sense when he called me Blazefur.

I thrashed in my covers and when I was fully awake, I grabbed my jacket and headed outside. I didn't know where I was going until I entered the warrior's den. I carefully walked through the cabin not wanting to be heard. I found myself climbing the stairs to the second floor.

This was where the senior warriors slept. I didn't know why I was up here but apparently, I needed somebody to talk to. I stopped at Tigerclaw's door, which was wide open and he had a single candle lit. It looked like he was writing or sketching something in the book he had in his hands. I leaned against the doorframe and watched him sketch.

The way his brows furrowed in confusion was adorable. As soon as he saw me move he got up from his bed and walked over to me.

"What's wrong?" There were no grunts or growls. His voice was soft; even caring.

I looked away from him noting wanting to look at him. I felt his fingers slip under my chin to lift it. As soon as he saw my tear-stained cheeks he lifted me up off of the ground. I buried my head in his shoulder and wrapped my legs around his waist. He walked over to the bed and set me on the covers carefully. He laid down beside me and I clutched onto his shirt and cried. It was the first time I allowed myself to cry since I got here. All he did was rub my back and tell me it was okay.

He tried to detach me from him but I was holding on too tight. Tigerclaw sighed. He managed to get me to look at him.

"What's wrong?" He repeated.

What was I going to tell him? That I had a *really* bad nightmare and I was too scared. He'd probably think I wanted to go back to my dad crying.

"Nothing," I lie.

"I don't like it when people lie, Blazepaw," Oh shit, he used my name.

"You'll think it's stupid,"

"I'm sure I won't,"

"You will,"

"I won't,"

"You will,"

"I won't!" snaps Tigerclaw.

"You will," I mutter.

If he could, I bet smoke would be coming out of his nose by now.

"Just tell me," He groans.

"It was about my brother. He-" I choked on a sob.

"He tried t-to kill me. A-and he had me pinned to the ground-d as he d-drew knife marks down my body," I flung my arms around his neck again.

I tried to breathe but I got so choked on my sobs it became harder and harder to breathe. My blue eyes were now puffy and red from all the tears.

"Breathe. You need to breathe," Tigerclaw murmured calmly.

I took in a deep breath and let it out. I repeated it several times. He cupped my cheek in one hand and looked me straight in the eyes. He sighs and looks at the moon. He wiped my tears away. My breath slowed and became normal.

"Do you want to stay for the rest of the night?" He asks.

I nodded. Tigerclaw and I slip under the covers. I try to keep as much distance as possible but he wraps an arm around my waist and my body's instinct was to press against him. He blew out the candle and just like that, I had fallen into sleep. This time my dreams were about Tigerclaw and only Tigerclaw.

Tigerclaw and I had grown closer over the past few days. Ravenpaw started asking me how Tigerclaw liked me so much. I still helped take care of Yellowfang and I started to bond with her. Firepaw trudged into my room like a bear

"Wake up," Firepaw says. "Or you'll be late for training."

I groaned and threw my pillow at him. 50 points if I hit the stomach, 100 points if I hit the head. I got 100 points. He huffs and barges into Graypaw's room.

I sat up and yawned. I went into the bathroom and did my usual morning routine. When I headed outside I could see a deep blue sky through the leaves and branches that overhung the camp. Today, however, a heavy dew glistened on the fern fronds and sparkled on the grass. Summer was drawing to a close and soon it would be Fall. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the peaceful morning.

"Another day looking after that mangy old fleabag, eh, Firepaw?"

says Dustpaw. "I bet you wish you were out training with us."

And now it's ruined.

"Perhaps he thinks a human is better off staying in camp, tending to the sick," says Sandpaw rudely.

"Perhaps I think you need to stop being a bitch!" I snort and Sandpaw doesn't say anything.

Firepaw stopped beside me. "What is Whitestorm teaching you today?"

"We're doing battle training today. He's going to teach me how a real warrior fights," Sandpaw replied proudly.

"Lionheart's taking me to the Great Sycamore," says Graypaw, "to practice my climbing. I'd best go. He'll be waiting."

"I'll come with you to the top of the ravine," says Firepaw. "I have to catch breakfast for Yellowfang. Coming, Ravenpaw? Tigerclaw must have something planned for you. And what about you Blazepaw? I'm sure Bluestar has something she wants to teach you."

I murmured that she was sending me with Whitestorm and Sandpaw. So much fun. Ravenpaw sighed and nodded, then followed Graypaw and Firepaw as they trotted out of the camp. Even though his injury was completely healed, he still seemed to have little enthusiasm for warrior training. I followed after Firepaw.

My battle training with Sandpaw and Whitestorm left me sore when Firepaw and I walked back into camp. As much as Sandpaw tried to defeat me, she had no chance. After she cursed me out and I gave her a good punch. I was delighted to see I had broken her nose. Then she ran back to Spottedleaf. Sandpaw didn't tell anyone. I was at least grateful for that.

"Here," says Firepaw. He dropped a large rabbit and a chaffinch onto the ground beside Yellowfang.

"About time," she growled. The woman had still been sleeping when we had entered the camp after our hunting trip. But the smell of

fresh-kill must have woken her, for now, she had pulled herself into a sitting position.

She dropped her head and hungrily gulped down Firepaw's offerings. She had developed a massive appetite as her strength returned. Her wound was healing well, but her temper remained as fierce and unpredictable as ever.

I noticed a gang of small kids tumbling in the dusty earth nearby. They were mauling each other and play-fighting, sometimes quite viciously. I saw Yellowfang tense.

"Feel my teeth, Brokenstar!" squealed one. He leaped onto the back of another one, who was pretending to be the ShadowClan leader. The two kids bundled toward the Highrock. Suddenly the one gave a mighty heave and flung the other from his back. With a startled squeak, the little boy cannoned into Yellowfang's side.

"Stay away from me!" she hissed

The little boy's eyes widened, he ran back to his mother and hid behind her leg. She glared furiously at Yellowfang. Step by step, he cautiously backed away toward the safety of the nursery.

Yellowfang's reaction had shocked me. I thought I'd seen her at her most vicious when we fought after our first meeting, but her eyes burned with a new rage now. "I think the kids are finding it hard being confined to camp," Firepaw says cautiously. "They're getting restless."

"I don't care how restless they are," growled Yellowfang. "Just keep them away from me!"

"Don't you like kids?" Firepaw asked, curious. "Did you never have kids of your own?"

"Don't you know healers don't have kids?" hissed Yellowfang furiously.

"But I heard you were a warrior before that," Firepaw ventured.

"I have no kids!" Yellowfang spat. "Anyway"—her voice suddenly

lowered, and she sounded almost wistful—"accidents seem to happen to kids when I'm around them."

Her orange eyes clouded with emotion. "Just go away,"

Firepaw looked at me and then left. But I stayed.

"What do you want?" She asks.

"I've always wanted kids of my own," I murmur. I probably wasn't helping her but I wanted to talk to her.

Yellowfang turned her head toward me with interest.

"You would make a good mother," She turned her head and looked at Tigerclaw.

"You and he would make good babies," She grinned. Oh, StarClan I'm only sixteen, I don't need to talk about baby-making yet.

"Oh no no no no," I back away, "I'm too young! And what is he; 24?"

"Mhm, okay," She murmured.

I chuckled.

I watched the people around the camp. It had been like this every day since Bluestar had announced WindClan's disappearance. The queens were weaving twigs and leaves into a dense green wall around the sides of the nursery, the elders were digging a hole to store the prey and warriors were busy carrying twigs and branches to secure the camp walls.

There was an air of quiet concentration, a determination to make the Clan as secure and well-supplied as possible. If ShadowClan made a move on our territory, ThunderClan would shelter inside the camp. We would not let ourselves be driven from our hunting grounds as easily as WindClan had been. That's the one thing I like about ThunderClan; they're brave and determined. That's what makes a good warrior. But sometimes you have to be afraid to be brave. And sometimes you have to be doubtful to be determined.

Darkstripe, Longtail, Willowpelt, and Dustpaw were waiting silently at the camp entrance. Their eyes were fixed on the opening to the gorse tunnel. A patrol was just returning, dusty and foot-sore. As soon as the warriors entered the camp, Darkstripe and his companions approached and exchanged words with them. Then they slipped quickly out of the camp. ThunderClan's borders were not being left unguarded for a moment.

I followed Firepaw's tracks all the way to the river where he was washing his hands. He sat up and smiled. A rustle in the bushes above me made us look up, although the familiar scent that reached our noses told us there was nothing to be alarmed about.

"What are you doing in there?" Graypaw and Ravenpaw were standing looking at him as if he were mad.

"Mouse bile." Firepaw grimaced. "Don't ask! Where are Lionheart and Tigerclaw?"

"They've gone to join the next patrol," answered Graypaw. "They ordered us to spend the rest of the afternoon hunting."

"Halftail told me the same thing," Firepaw says. "Everyone's busy back at camp. You'd think we were about to be attacked at any moment."

"Who says we won't be?" says Ravenpaw, his eyes flicking from side to side as if he expected an enemy patrol to leap out of the bushes at any time.

I looked at the heap of fresh-kill that was piled beside the two apprentices. "Looks like you've done all right today," I say.

"Yeah," says Graypaw proudly. "And we've still got the rest of the afternoon to hunt. Do you want to join us?"

"You bet!" Firepaw dried his hands on his pants and bounded after our friends. I followed behind.

We could tell that the people back at camp were impressed with the amount of prey the four of us had managed to catch during our afternoon hunt. We were welcomed back with smiles and friendly

nudges. It took us four journeys to carry our bumper catch to the storage hole the elders had dug.

Lionheart and Tigerclaw had just returned with their patrol as Firepaw, Graypaw, Ravenpaw, and I carried our last load into the camp.

"Well done, you four," says Lionheart. "I hear you've been busy. The store is almost full. You might as well add that last lot to the pile of fresh-kill for tonight. And take some of it back to your den with you. You deserve a feast!"

The four of us smiled with delight.

"I hope you've not been neglecting Yellowfang with all this hunting, Firepaw," Tigerclaw growled warningly.

Fierpaw shook his head, looking eager to get away. We had obeyed the warrior code this time and not eaten a morsel while we were hunting for the Clan. Nor had Graypaw or Ravenpaw or Firepaw.

We trotted away and dropped the last of our catch on the fresh-kill that already lay at the center of the clearing. Then each of us took a piece and carried it back to our tree stump.

"Where are Dustpaw and Sandpaw?" asked Ravenpaw.

"They must still be out on patrol," I guessed.

"Good," says Graypaw. "Peace and quiet."

We ate our fill and lay back to rest. The cool evening air was welcome after the heat of the day.

"Hey! Guess what!" says Graypaw suddenly. "Ravenpaw managed to squeeze a compliment out of old Tigerclaw this morning!"

"Really?" Firepaw gasped. "What on earth did you do to please Tigerclaw—fly?"

"Well," Ravenpaw began shyly, looking at his feet, "I caught a crow."

"How'd you manage that?" I asked, impressed.

"It was an old one," Ravenpaw admitted modestly.

"But it was huge," added Graypaw. "Even Tigerclaw couldn't find fault with that! He's been in such a bad mood since Bluestar took you on as her apprentice." He licked his finger thoughtfully for a moment. "Hang on, make that since Lionheart was made deputy."

"Make that since forever," I joke.

"You know what, that's probably right!" For once Ravenpaw smiled.

All of us laughed.

Then Ravenpaw went back to his normal nervous self. "He's just worried about ShadowClan, and the extra patrols," says Ravenpaw, hastily. "You should try not to annoy him."

Our conversation was interrupted by a loud yowl from the other side of the clearing.

"Oh, no." Firepaw groaned, getting to his feet. "I forgot to take Yellowfang her share!"

"You wait here," says Graypaw, leaping up. "I'll take her something."

"No, I'd better go," Firepaw protested. "This is my punishment, not yours."

"No one will notice," argued Graypaw. "They're all busy eating. You know me: quiet as a mouse, quick as a fish. Wait here."

"I'll go," I volunteer.

Graypaw opened his mouth to protest but I gave him a glare so fierce he clamped his mouth shut and watched. I trotted over to the fresh-kill pile and picked something up for Yellowfang.

"Stop, Blazepaw!" A loud growl rumbled from the entrance to the warriors' den. Tigerclaw strode out and marched over to me.

"Where are you taking those squirrels?" he demanded.

"To Yellowfang. You know, the cranky old lady on the other side of the clearing?" I ask jokingly.

He narrowed his eyes. "Have you eaten?"

I roll my eyes. "You're acting like Bluestar's starving me to death,"

"Every ThunderClan member needs to eat on a daily basis. I was just making sure you've had enough to eat." With that, he abruptly turned around and trudged back into the warrior's den. I wanted to watch him go until another angry yowl from Yellowfang sent me sprinting across the clearing.

Training assessment

[image]

Chapter 7
Sister are different flowers from the same garden

[image]

♛♛♛

By the following morning, a thin drizzle soaked the treetops and dripped down into the camp. I awoke to feel drowsy and gloomy. This is going to be a great day! Note to sarcasm. I did my morning routine and headed outside. I met Firepaw outside and we went into Yellowfang's cabin.

Yellowfang was just stirring. She lifted her head and squinted at Firepaw and I as we approached. "My bones ache this morning. Has it been raining all night?"

"Just after midnight. Why don't you move to the nursery? It's warmer in there and I bet the queens would be okay with it if you don't snap at their kids," I suggested

"With all those crying babies? I'd rather sleep in a mud puddle," growled Yellowfang rudely.

"Then at least let us fetch you some dry bedding," Firepaw offered, seeming keen to drop the subject of kids if it upset the old woman so much.

"Thank you, Firepaw and Blazepaw" replied Yellowfang quietly, settling down again.

Both Firepaw and I exchange glances with wide eyes. She hadn't called us humans. Yellowfang opened one eye and growled.

"Don't stand there like stupid squirrels!" This was more like the Yellowfang we were used to.

I nodded and sprinted off. We almost crashed into Speckletail in the middle of the clearing. This was the queen who had watched Yellowfang's angry outburst at the little kid the day before.

"Sorry, Speckletail," Firepaw says. "Are you on your way to see Yellowfang?"

"What would I want with *that* unnatural creature?" replied Speckletail crossly. "Actually it's you guys I was looking for. Bluestar wants to see you two."

Firepaw and I hurried toward the Highrock and Bluestar's den. When we came in, she was trying to tame her wild hair. She paused when she noticed Firepaw and I.

"How is Yellowfang today?" she says.

"Her bedding is wet, so we were going to fetch her more," I replied.

"I'll ask one of the queens to see to that." Bluestar gave her hair another brush and then eyed Firepaw and I carefully.

"Is she fit enough to hunt for herself yet?" she asked.

"I don't think so," Firepaw says, "but she can walk well enough now."

"I see," says Bluestar. She looked thoughtful for a moment. "It is time for you to return to your training, Firepaw, and Blazepaw. But you'll need to work hard to make up for the time you have lost."

Firepaw grinned and I smirked. Battle training should be easy.

"Great! I mean, thank you, Bluestar!" Firepaw stammered.

"You will go out with Tigerclaw, Graypaw, and Ravenpaw this morning," Bluestar continued. "I've asked Tigerclaw to assess the warrior skills of all our apprentices. Don't worry about Yellowfang; I'll make sure someone sees to her while you are gone."

Firepaw and I nodded.

"Now, join your companions," Bluestar ordered. "I expect they're waiting for you."

"Thank you, Bluestar," Firepaw says.

Bluestar nodded then looked at me. "You stay,"

Firepaw was hesitant but left shortly. "I've been watching you lately. How did you know the whole 'A rabbit will smell you before he sees you, but a mouse will feel your footsteps through the ground before he even smells you?'"

"My mom taught me," I whisper suddenly feeling a warm feeling inside of me.

"Exactly. Everything little thing you have done that relates to clan knowledge you say your mother taught you," She sighs and closes her eyes.

"This is hard to tell you so I might as well show you," She stopped brushing her hair, crouched beside the bed, and pulled out a small bin.

She got out a baby blanket and a sketchbook and handed them to me. "Read it,"

I opened the book and made a shocking discovery.

Dear Julia,
Today I had just given birth to you and you are sleeping peacefully in my arms. Bluefur and Snowfur are my sisters, your aunts. I'm writing to you because I knew the moment you were born you were going to be a fighter. Your father is waiting at the house for me and you. I hate to take away the freedom of being in a clan and learning clan life from you but I had no choice.

As much as I love your father I couldn't leave him at the human world without meeting his daughter. I know that I had to leave and I know in the future I'll train you to be like one of the warriors. I know one day you would cross that border, and the moment you did Bluefur would

recognize you. I knew I could never tell you about clan life until you really see it. I kept this and the baby blanket with Bluefur because I knew she would keep them safe. I knew deep down inside of me I had to train as much as I could before my body couldn't handle it. You had been my little miracle you know.

While Featherwhisker was trying to test to see if I was expecting he also said that I had cancer. He said the baby most likely wouldn't survive. But you did. What I'm trying to say to you is that I love you and I hope that my little warrior becomes the strongest of all.

Love you,
Fawnstep.

I put the letter down and brought the baby blanket to my nose.

"Thank you," I whisper pulling Bluestar into a hug.

"I have two questions before I leave. One: Do I call you aunt? Two: Have I not met Snowfur yet?" I ask.

"You don't have to call me aunt. Snowfur... she died right after you were born and her son... Whitestorm is your cousin."

My mouth dropped open. "So he was four when Mom gave birth to me?"

Bluestar nodded and smiled slightly as if thinking of the memory.

"He and Tigerkit kept on pestering Snowfur to see if you were there yet,"

"You- Tigerkit-wha-wait-he-huh?" I tried to speak but it only came out in bits.

"Go to your training session, Tigerclaw is waiting," She murmured.

I whispered 'Thank you' again before heading out. I had true warrior blood!

I walked down to the training hollow and saw Tigerclaw waiting impatiently.

"Finally," He growled.

"I know," I answer simply.

"What?"

"I know. I know all of it. You were there when I was born, weren't you?"

"How do you know that?" He asked sharply.

"Bluestar told me." My eyes gleamed.

His face changed and he pulled me into a hug.

"It's nice to have you back Wormkit," he says into my hair.

I pulled away from the hug and looked at him as if he had grown two heads. I knew he wouldn't show it, but he had a small smile playing on his lips.

"So my new nickname is Wormkit?" I ask.

"When you were a baby, you would constantly wiggle. There was no stopping you from moving." he chuckles.

"I think I need to get on my assessment." I chuckle pointing at the sun.

"I expect you to bring back prey," he growls playfully.

"Yes sir!" I saluted.

"Alright, go as far as TallPines and see what you find. Got it?"

"Got it," I smiled and ran deep into the forest.

I got my bow out and concentrated on the area in front of me. I did the stalking crouch Lionheart had taught me and listened for any movement. When I heard scraping, I immediately stopped moving and turned towards the movement slowly. I brought my bow up and sharpened my eyesight. Then I realized it wasn't a deer. It was a human. I couldn't tell if it was from my own clan or a different clan.

It snapped its head towards me.

Well shit, Blazepaw! It had blue eyes just like me. It stared at me and I finally decided to make a move.

"Can you come out? I won't hurt you," Well it depends on who you are, anyway.

I put my bow away and put my hands up to show them I wasn't going to do anything. It came out slowly and my mouth dropped open.

"Lily?" I gasp.

"Julia!" she squeals, crushing me with a hug.

I wrapped my arms around her, still gaping.

"How-what-when did you get here?" I stutter, holding her at arm's length.

"Dad told me about mom. He told me where you'd most likely be so here I am!" she smiled.

"My people will be angry if I bring you into the camp," I murmur, messing with her french braid.

"They won't be mad if they know I'm your sister. We share mom's blood!"

I sigh. "Well, I have an assessment I have to do. So you can wait here while I catch some prey,"

She nods. "I'll wait,"

I offer her a small smile and ran away to a new spot. I found two squirrels, three rabbits, and a huge doe. I put them in a big pile and went back to Lily who was concentrating on a rabbit. She hit it in the eye.

"Good job!" I praise.

"I thought I would offer it to the clan. You know, in case they don't except me."

"They will." I say firmly, "You're my sister. We share blood."

She smiles and hugs me.

Lily helped me carry the prey to Tigerclaw, who was staring at me with rage. His amber eyes, glowing like burning coal.

"Who's this?" his voice was cold, unlike earlier when he talked to me.

"My sister," I pat her on the back.

She held up the rabbit and handed it to Tigerclaw. "It was a rather sloppy kill, but the clan needs to be fed,"

He looked at her with surprise. "Thanks," he muttered.

Then, Firepaw, Graypaw, and Ravenpaw leaped out of the bushes with more prey.

"Yuck!" spat Graypaw. "Squirrels are too furry! I'll have to stick with rabbits and deer,"

Meanwhile, Ravenpaw was dragging a snake.

"Did that bite you?" Lily gasps examining the snake.

"I was too quick for it!" he beamed and dropped the snake at her feet.

She jumped in fright and scuffled closer to me.

"Hey, Lilybean!" Firepaw dropped his kill and hugged Lily.

Tigerclaw silenced us with a cold stare. "Come on," he says shortly. "Let's collect the rest of your prey and get back to camp."

Firepaw, Graypaw, Ravenpaw, Lily, and I entered the camp, strolling behind Tigerclaw. Our impressive days of catch hung from our hands, although Ravenpaw kept on tripping over his. Lily

offered to help carry it, and Ravenpaw looked relieved.

As we emerged from the gorse into the camp, a group of young kids scrambled out of the nursery to watch us pass.

"Look!" I heard one of them say. "Apprentices, just back from hunting!" I recognized the little boy Yellowfang had hissed at the day before.

I looked at Lilackit, who was staring at my sister and I with round eyes as big as the moon.

"Isn't that the human, Firepaw?" squeaked the one.

"Look at his hair! It's so bright!"

"And Blazepaw's! I heard she's the best fighter in the clan! I hope I have her as my mentor!" Lilackit looked at me with admiration.

"They say Firepaw's a good hunter," the other added. "He looks a bit like Lionheart. Do you suppose he's as good as him?"

"I can't wait to start my training," says the first. "I'm going to be the best warrior ThunderClan has ever seen!"

Lily must've heard then because she gave them a small wave. All of them squealed and hid behind one another.

We walked to the fresh-kill pile and dropped our prey, leaving some for ourselves.

"What shall I do with it?" asked Ravenpaw, sniffing the snake's long body as it lay beside the heap.

"Can you eat adders?" asked Graypaw.

"I think you can," I say

"Trust you to think of your stomach!" Firepaw joked, butting Graypaw with his head.

"Well, I wouldn't want to eat it," murmured Ravenpaw, poking it

with his finger.

"Let's put it on the tree stump, then," suggested Graypaw, "so that Dustpaw and Sandpaw can see it when they get back."

We each carried a piece of their fresh-kill, and the snake, back to our den. Graypaw carefully placed the snake on the stump, arranging the snake so that it could be seen clearly from all sides. Then we ate. When we had finished we sat close together and talked.

"I wonder who Bluestar will choose to go to the Gathering?" Firepaw says. "It'll be full moon tomorrow."

"Sandpaw and Dustpaw have been twice already," replied Graypaw.

"Perhaps Bluestar will choose one of us this time," says Firepaw. "After all, we've been training for almost three months now."

"But Sandpaw and Dustpaw are still the eldest apprentices," Ravenpaw pointed out.

I nodded. "And this Gathering will be an important one. It'll be the first time the Clans have met since WindClan disappeared. No person knows what ShadowClan is going to say about it."

Tigerclaw's deep voice interrupted us. "You are right." The warrior had strolled up to us unnoticed. "By the way, you three," he added smoothly, "Bluestar wants to see you."

He pointed at Lily, Firepaw, and I. Firepaw looked up, startled.

"Now—if you can spare the time," Tigerclaw says, flashing a look at me. We get up and walk over to Bluestar. Lily grabs my hand.

"Tigerclaw has told me that he saw you talking with a person from the human side today," she says to Firepaw.

"But—" Firepaw began.

"He said that you began by fighting with this person but ended up hugging with it." I look at him with shock. I wasn't the only one

who had an exciting day.

"That's true," Firepaw admitted.

"But he was an old friend. We grew up together." He paused and swallowed. "When I lived with the humans."

Bluestar looked at him for a long moment. "Do you miss your old life, Firepaw?" she asked. "Think carefully, now."

"No!" he said, a little too loud.

I rubbed his back, whispering 'Calm down.'

"Do you wish to leave the Clan?"

"Of course not!" Firepaw seemed shocked by her question.

Bluestar didn't seem to hear the passion in his answer. She shook her head, looking suddenly old and tired. "I won't judge you if you leave us, Firepaw. Perhaps I expected too much of you. Perhaps my judgment has been clouded by the Clan's need for new warriors."

"But my place is here! This is my home," he protested.

"I need more than that, Firepaw. I need to be able to trust in your loyalty to ThunderClan, especially now that it looks like ShadowClan is planning an attack. We don't have room for anyone who isn't sure whether their heart lies in the past or the present."

Firepaw took a deep breath. "When I saw Smudge today—that's the person Tigerclaw saw me talking with—I saw what life would have been like if I had stayed with the humans. I felt happy that I had not stayed. I was proud I left." He held Bluestar's gaze without flinching."Meeting Smudge made me certain I made the right decision. I could never have been satisfied with the soft life of a human."

Bluestar looked closely at him for a moment, her eyes narrow. Then she nodded. "Very well," she said. "I believe you."

"Firepaw, although you showed bad judgment today in talking to

that person, Tigerclaw was impressed by your hunting skills. In fact, he reported that you all did well. I am pleased with your progress. You will come to the Gathering—all four of you."

"What about Sandpaw and Dustpaw?" I ask.

"They will remain behind and guard the camp," replied Bluestar. "Now you may go."

Firepaw gave me a hug and went back to Graypaw and Ravenpaw.

"I see you brought your sister," she narrows her eyes at Lily.

 "Yes. But she said it was fine if you didn't want her to stay in the clan." I say quickly.

"No, no, I do want her. She shares your blood after all," Bluestar smirked, "Would you like to stay?" Lily nodded eagerly.

"How old are you?"

"12,"

"Then I will have a ceremony later this evening. Would you like to keep your name?"

"It doesn't matter. Or you could add a suffix to my name. So I would be Lilypaw,"

"Very well. You're dismissed," then she went back to eating.

Spotify

Listen to my playlist on Spotify!

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/24nlxbcDZXXNddBby6LyTi

It's called Fire in my heart if the link doesn't work! :)

Gathering

Chapter 8

Fate whispers to the warrior
"***You cannot withstand the storm***"
And the warrior whispers back
"***I am the storm***"
-Unknown

[image]

♛♛♛

Firepaw and I peered over the brow of a bush-covered slope. Graypaw and Ravenpaw crouched beside us. Next to us, a group of ThunderClan elders, queens, and warriors waited in the undergrowth for Bluestar to give the signal. Firepaw and I had not been to this place since our first journey with Lionheart and Tigerclaw.

The steep-side glade looked different now. The rich greenness of the woods had been bleached away by the cold light of the full moon, and the leaves on the trees glowed silver. At the bottom stood the large oaks that marked where the corner of each Clan's territory touched the other three.

"Look at all those people down there!" hissed Ravenpaw under his breath.

"There's Crookedstar!" Graypaw hissed back. "RiverClan's leader."

"Where?" Firepaw says, nudging Graypaw impatiently.

Graypaw pointed at a man with Chesnut-colored hair sitting beside The Great rock.

I gulp. Even from this distance, his old face showed the signs of a harsh life and his mouth looked twisted as if it had once been broken and had healed badly.

"Hey!" says Graypaw. "Did you see Sandpaw spit when I told her I hoped she had a nice evening at home?"

"You bet!" Firepaw grinned. Ravenpaw interrupted them with a muffled growl.

"Look! There's Brokenstar—ShadowClan's leader," he hissed.

He had a broad flattened face, cold amber eyes, and lots of muscles. There was a stillness in the way he sat and stared around him that made my neck hair prickle uncomfortably.

"He looks pretty nasty," Firepaw muttered.

"Yeah," agreed Graypaw. "He's certainly got a reputation among all the Clans for not suffering fools gladly. And he's not been leader that long—four moons, ever since his father, Raggedstar, died."

Midnight stomped her foot. I pat her neck and scratch between her ears.

"Don't worry girl," I murmur.

Tigerclaw trotted up to me on his horse.

"Nervous?"

"A little," I tilt my head.

"Stay with me, okay?"

"What?" I look at him with confusion.

"I should warn you about ShadowClan and RiverClan. Especially, the males. They've been known to boast to girls. A little too much. You're cute; there's no denying it. Males get a little too excited when it comes to cute girls. Even if they're too young," he takes a deep breath, "Just stay close to me or Firepaw, okay?"

I nod suddenly not wanting to go down there. Bluestar nodded her head as the signal. My heart missed a beat as the ThunderClan people rose as one and galloped through the bushes, down toward the meeting place. I felt the wind rush through my hair as Midnight took off at full speed. Lionheart and Whitestorm were on both sides of Bluestar with Tigerclaw and I close behind.

I felt thrilled. The other people looked even more impressive closeup, milling about the Great Rock. A large warrior strode past. Firepaw and Ravenpaw looked at him in awe.

"Look at his feet!" Ravenpaw murmured.

"It must be Blackfoot," says Graypaw. "ShadowClan's new deputy."

"When does the meeting begin?" Ravenpaw asked Whitestorm.

"Be patient, Ravenpaw," he answered. "The sky is clear tonight, so we have plenty of time."

Lionheart leaned over and added, "We warriors like to spend a little time boasting about our victories, while the elders swap tales about the ancient days before the Humans came here." All three apprentices looked up at him.

Dappletail, One-eye, and Smallear headed straight off toward a group of elderly people who were settling themselves below one of the oak trees. Whitestorm and Lionheart strolled over to another pair of warriors whom I did not know. I sniffed the air and recognized their scent as RiverClan.

Bluestar's voice sounded behind us. "Don't waste any of your time tonight," she warned. "This is a good opportunity to meet your enemies. Listen to them; remember what they look like and how they behave. There is a great deal to be learned from these

meetings."

"And say little," warned Tigerclaw. "Don't give anything away that might be used against us once the moon has waned."

After we talked a little, we parted our ways. I got of Midnight and she trotted away to other horses. I went to the edge of the clearing and examined the area, listening for any clues about who I'll be fighting next. I leaned against the tree and crossed my elbows.

"Lost?" I whip my head around and got out a knife.

"Woah, watch the knife," he chuckled.

I put it back in my pocket and eyed him wearily.

"Being curious, I see," he grinned. But this grin wasn't a nice grin. It was evil.

Then I remembered what Tigerclaw had said; 'You're cute; there's no denying it. Males get a little too excited when it comes to cute girls. Even if they're too young.' I felt sudden dread in my stomach. I acted innocent.

"Well, my friends are probably looking for me so I should go," I murmur, turning to leave.

The guy put his arm in front of me so I couldn't leave.

"I don't think you're going anywhere, sweetheart," his face was inches from mine, and his hand was beside my head. He took out his own dagger and traced it along my cheek. I sucked in an unsteady breath as the burning sensation came in.

I looked away from him. His fingers traced my cheek and forced me to look at him. "Pretty. What's a pretty girl like you doing here?"

"Let me leave," my voice was strong. But not strong enough.

"You know, your so pretty-" I gripped the knife in my hand and plunged it into his ribcage. And twisted. Hard. He shouted in agony and dropped to the ground. I took this as my chance but with the

knife still in his hand, he managed to drive it into my thigh.

I screeched and fell to the ground. Not a single person has heard us. He clawed his way up to me-knife in hand-ready to kill. He dug his knife deep into the palm of my right hand. A blood-curdling scream ripped from my throat. I kicked his abdomen; sending him flying into a tree. As I tore the knife from my hand, I bit my lip so hard that I bled.

I ran through the crowd until I saw anyone from ThunderClan. I stopped and stared at the people around me, breathing heavily.

"Blazepaw." Tigerclaw snapped his finger in front of my face, causing me to flinch.

"Why is there blood all over you?" he questioned, starting to pale.

I blinked. My vision started to haze, making me wobble. I fell into the warm, muscular arms of Tigerclaw. My ears started to ring and I stumbled to keep my balance. I grumbled angrily as Tigerclaw refused to let me go. I kept mumbling angrily as he picked me up started to walk somewhere. I clenched my bloody hand. I let my head fall back as I lost all consciousness.

♛♛♛

I lifted my head and hissed as water was poured on my open wound. I blinked a couple of times before regaining my vision. I noticed the familiar broad shoulders, strong arms, amber eyes, and brown hair. The scent of damp wood, pine trees, and smoke wafted into my nose, making me melt. It smelt wonderful.

"Sleepyhead," Tigerclaw teased, pressing the wet cloth on my face.

"Is that you I smell?" I wince as he wiped the access blood.

"Obviously," he murmured, casting his gaze to me, "Do I smell bad?"

"No."

"Good. I don't want people saying I smell bad."

His lips turn into a thin line as he glanced at me. "So what happened to you?"

I squirmed underneath him. He impatiently told me to hold still. I sighed and looked at my bloody hands. My hands were coated in the stranger's and my blood.

"A guy cornered me," Tigerclaw raises a brow.

"What did I tell you?" he asked softly.

"I know," I sighed, "I know you're probably mad but I'm young and stupid and-"

"I'm not mad," he insisted, "You should've listened to me."

I winced again. Once he was done with my face, he immediately went to clean my hands. His jaw clenched.

"Who?" he dipped the now-bloody cloth in the river and started wiping the excess blood off my hands.

"I don't know," I grip on my hand tightened, "I think a ShadowClan warrior-by the smells of him,"

He hummed. "How long have I been out?"

"Mhm... about 30 minutes." He squinted at my hand.

"What?" I froze.

"Nothing..." he murmured, "That guy never fractured a single bone in your hand. The knife went straight through your hand, yes, but didn't touch a single bone. You should be grateful."

"I am," I sighed. What if it messed with my sketching? I wouldn't be able to draw again.

Tigerclaw noticed my fidgeting. "How bad does it hurt?"

As he said those words, he pressed the damp cloth on the wound, causing me to bite onto the collar of his shirt. I took heavy breaths

in and out of my nose and clenched my eyes shut.

Let it be over, let it be over, let it be over, I kept praying in my head.

Hot, salty tears slid down my face. I let go of his shirt. I rested my temple on the crook of his shoulder and let silent tears fall.

Tigerclaw stared at me. I let myself fall back. "Sorry,"

"It's fine. Bite my shirt whenever you want. I don't care," he murmured, casting his gaze back to my hand.

He's been so kind to me and I've never really realized why. I mean, he never cared about the apprentices. He always snaps at Ravenpaw and always criticizes Firepaw.

"Tigerclaw?" I manage to muster, "I thought you didn't give a shit about apprentices?"

He pauses, then snorted. "I don't. You're different."

"How?" I cry.

"Because you're Fawnstep's lost daughter. Everyone thought she died. But she didn't. And if something happens to her, and her blood is on my hands, I'll never forgive myself." Tigerclaw pauses, "Your mother was loved by everyone, Blazepaw. She loved you so much. She loved everyone. She had heart of gold..."

He trailed away and I was left with tears in my eyes. I never knew how popular Mom was in the Clans. And she left all of that for me. For Lily. For Dad. She had given up her whole life for her family. I chewed on my lip and thought hard.

"You're done, Wormkit," I looked at my freshly patched wounds.

"I hate it when you call me that," I grumble.

"No thank you? Damn, that hurt."

"Shut up," I shoved his arm.

Tigerclaw chuckled and looked up at the moon. "Come on, let's get back to the gathering,"

Our walk through the woods were quiet. Peaceful. I don't understand how Firepaw could think Tigerclaw is a murderer. He's been so kind to me. And I'm suspecting not all of it is because of my mother. When we got to the edge of the clearing, peoples screams were heard everywhere. Tigerclaw pushed me behind him. I stood there, half frozen.

Then I heard the yelling of Brokenstar.

"I also bring news that is important to the safety of your children. A ShadowClan member has turned rogue and spurned the warrior code. We chased her out of our camp, but we do not know where she is now. She looks a mangy old creature, but she has a bite like TigerClan."

It's Yellowfang! Could Brokenstar possibly be talking about Yellowfang? Tigerclaw grabbed my uninjured hand pulled me to the clearing. I nudged him and pointed at Firepaw, Graypaw, and Ravenpaw, hoping he would understand. He nodded. I

"She is dangerous. I warn you—do not offer shelter to her. And"—Brokenstar paused dramatically—"until she is caught and killed, I urge you to keep a close eye on your kids."

I knew from the nervous growls that rumbled in the throats of the ThunderClan people that they, too, had thought of Yellowfang. The bold woman had done nothing to endear herself to her reluctant hosts, and I guessed it wouldn't take much to drum up hatred against her—even the words of a despised enemy like Brokenstar would be enough.

The ShadowClan warriors began to push their way out of the throng of people. Brokenstar leaped down from the rock, and his warriors immediately surrounded him and escorted him away from Fourtrees, back into ShadowClan territory. The remaining ShadowClan members followed quickly behind.

"What do you think of all that?" Graypaw says in a low voice.

Ravenpaw bounded over before Firepaw could reply.

"What's going to happen now?" he wailed, his eyes wider than ever. Firepaw didn't answer.

The elders of ThunderClan were gathering nearby, and I was straining to hear what they were saying.

"That must be Yellowfang he was talking about," growled Smallear.

"Well, she did snap at Goldenflower's youngest kit the other day," murmured Speckletail darkly.

She was the oldest nursery queen, and fiercely protective of all the kids.

"And we've left her behind, with the camp virtually unguarded!" wailed One-eye, who for once seemed to be having no trouble hearing everything.

"I tried to tell you she was a danger to us," hissed Darkstripe. "Bluestar has to listen to reason now and get rid of her before she harms any of our young!"

Tigerclaw strode up to the group. "We must return to camp at once and deal with this rogue!" he yowled.

Firepaw saw my tear-stained cheeks and looked at me with worry in his eyes.

"What happened?"

"A ShadowClan warrior tried to hurt me," I took deep breaths.

"Where is he?" Firepaw kind green eyes turned dark.

"I don't know. I think he left."

"I'll kill him!" Firepaw snarled.

"Don't. There's enough trouble between ShadowClan and us." I murmur, grabbing his arm.

Firepaw looked panicked for a second then turned around and raced away to his horse. My brow furrowed with confusion. Making sure nobody was looking, I boarded Midnight and followed Firepaw.

When I got in the camp, he was talking with Yellowfang urgently. In the distance, I could hear the yowls of angry people. Rustling in the undergrowth beyond the camp boundary told me that the people were almost at the entrance.

Through the gorse came the people—Bluestar first, accompanied by Lionheart. Frostfur and Willowpelt were right behind them. Frostfur raced away from the troop immediately and ran toward the nursery. Tigerclaw and Darkstripe strode into the clearing, shoulder to shoulder, looking grim. The others followed behind, with Ravenpaw and Graypaw at the rear. As soon as we saw our friends, Firepaw and I trotted to join them.

"You went to warn Yellowfang, didn't you?" whispered Graypaw when Firepaw and I reached his side.

"Yes, I did," Firepaw admitted. "But she won't leave. She trusts Bluestar to treat her fairly. Did anyone miss me?"

"Only us," Ravenpaw replied.

Around the camp, the people who had stayed behind began to wake up. They must have heard the aggression and the tension in the voices of the returning people, for they all came running into the clearing.

"What has happened?" called a warrior named Runningwind.

"Brokenstar has demanded hunting rights for ShadowClan in our territory!" replied Longtail loudly enough for all the people to hear.

Mousefur grabbed his hand and gave him a worried look.

"And he warned us about a rogue person who will harm our kids!" added Willowpelt. "It must be Yellowfang!"

Voices of outrage and distress rose from the crowd.

"Silence!" ordered Bluestar, leaping onto the Highrock. Instinctively, the people settled in front of her.

A loud screech made every person turn their heads toward the fallen tree. Tigerclaw and Darkstripe were dragging Yellowfang roughly from her nest. She shrieked furiously as they hauled her into the clearing and dumped her in front of the Highrock.

"NO! SHE'S HARMLESS!" I scream, trying to run up to them but Longtail had me pinned.

I thrashed and kicked.

"What is going on?" demanded Bluestar, jumping down from the Highrock and glaring at her warriors. "I gave no order to attack our prisoner."

"Let go of her," Bluestar's eyes were cold and her voice was harsh, "Lay another hand on her and see what happens,"

Longtail let me go.

Tigerclaw and Darkstripe instantly let go of Yellowfang.

Frostfur appeared from the nursery and pushed her way through to the front of the Clan.

"We got back in time," she says with a gasp. "The kids are safe!"

"Of course they are!" snapped Bluestar.

"But... you are going to throw Yellowfang out, aren't you?" Frostfur's brows scrunched in confusion.

"Throw her out?" spat Darkstripe, getting out a knife. "We should kill her now!"

"You won't! You'll have to kill me first!" I was about to lunge again, but Firepaw, Graypaw, and Ravenpaw held me back.

Bluestar fixed her piercing blue eyes on Darkstripe's furious face. "And what has she done?" she asked with an icy calm voice.

I held my breath.

"You were at the Gathering! Brokenstar said she—" Darkstripe started.

"Brokenstar said only that there is a rogue somewhere in the woods," says Bluestar, her voice menacingly quiet. "He did not mention Yellowfang by name. The kids are safe. For as long as she is in my Clan, Yellowfang will not be harmed in any way."

"I will leave now, if you wish it, Bluestar." rasped Yellowfang.

"There is no need," Bluestar replied. "You have done nothing wrong. You will be safe here." The ThunderClan leader lifted her gaze to the crowd of people that surrounded Yellowfang and said,

"It is time we discussed the real threat to our Clan: Brokenstar. We have already begun to prepare for an attack by ShadowClan," Bluestar began.

"We'll carry on with those preparations, and patrol our borders more frequently. WindClan has gone. RiverClan has given hunting rights to ShadowClan warriors. ThunderClan stands alone against Brokenstar."

A murmur of defiance rippled through the people. I felt my hands tingle with anticipation.

"Then we're not going to agree to Brokenstar's demands?" says Tigerclaw.

"Clans have never shared hunting rights before," Bluestar answered.

"They have always managed to support themselves in their own territories. There is no reason why this should change."

Tigerclaw nodded approvingly.

"But can we defend ourselves against a ShadowClan attack?" asked Smallear's tremulous voice. "WindClan didn't manage it! RiverClan won't even try!"

"We must try. We will not give up our territory without a fight." Bluestar met his gaze steadily.

"I shall travel to the Moonstone tomorrow," Bluestar announced. "The warriors of StarClan will give me the strength I need to lead ThunderClan through this dark time. You must all get some rest. We have a lot to do when daylight comes. I wish to talk with Lionheart now."

Now the Clan people hurriedly gathered in groups, talking in hushed voices full of excitement. I had heard of the Moonstone once but never asked about it.

"What's Moonstone?" Firepaw asked Graypaw.

"It's a rock deep underground that shines in the dark," whispered Graypaw. His voice was hoarse with awe. "All Clan leaders have to spend one night at the Moonstone when they are first chosen. There, the spirits of StarClan share with them."

"Share what with them?" I ask.

Graypaw frowned."I don't know," he admitted.

"I know only that the new leaders have to sleep near the stone, and as they sleep, they have special dreams. After that, they have the gift of nine lives, and take the name 'star.'"

Everybody parted their ways and I made my way to Lilypaw.

"I'm guessing nothing good happened?" She spread her arms and I gratefully stumbled into them.

"No," I rest my head on hers, and we hug each other.

As we were hugging each other I saw the shapes of Tigerclaw and Ravenpaw outside the warrior's den. I saw Ravenpaw flinch away from Tigerclaw's fierce words. The dark warrior loomed over him, twice his size, his eyes and teeth flashing in the moonlight. What was he saying to Ravenpaw? I was just about to creep nearer and listen when Ravenpaw backed away, turned, and ran across the clearing. Tigerclaw's eyes turned towards me and I was frozen to

the ground.

I turned around and went to the apprentice's den. I greeted Ravenpaw, but Ravenpaw hardly seemed to notice me. Instead, he pushed his way inside the den without a word. I got up to follow him when I saw Lionheart approaching.

"Well," says the ThunderClan deputy, striding up to the apprentices. "It seems that Firepaw, Graypaw, Ravenpaw, and Blazepaw are about to reach another important stage in their training."

"What's that?" says Graypaw, looking excited.

"Bluestar wishes you four to accompany her on her journey to the Moonstone!" Lionheart didn't miss the look of disappointment on the faces of Dustpaw and Sandpaw, because he added, "Don't worry, you two; you'll make the journey soon enough. For now, ThunderClan needs your strength and skill at the camp. I will remain here also."

Firepaw and I looked past Lionheart to our leader. She was moving from one group of warriors to another, saying instructions to each. Why would she choose us? Sandpaw and Dustpaw should be the ones going.

"She wants you to rest now," Lionheart continued. "But first go to Spottedleaf and collect the herbs you will need on this expedition. It's a long way. You will need something to give you strength and quell your appetite. There will be little time for catching prey."

Graypaw nodded, and I dragged my gaze away from Bluestar and nodded too.

"Where's Ravenpaw? asked Lionheart.

"He's in his bed already," replied Firepaw.

"Good. Leave him to sleep. You can fetch herbs for him," says Lionheart. "Rest well. You leave at dawn." He walked back to Bluestar's den.

"Well, then," says Sandpaw. "You'd better go and see Spottedleaf."

I strained to hear the sourness in her voice, but there was none. There was no time for jealousy now. All people in the Clan seemed to be united against the threat from ShadowClan.

Firepaw, Graypaw, and I walked quickly toward Spottedleaf's den. Spottedleaf seemed to be expecting us as we emerged into her moonlit clearing.

"You have come for some traveling herbs," she said.

"Yes, please," Firepaw answered. "And I think Yellowfang needs more poppy seeds. She seemed to be feeling her wounds."

"I will take her some after you have gone. And your traveling herbs are ready." Spottedleaf indicated a pile of carefully made leaf wraps.

"Enough for the four of you. The dark green herb will stop your hunger pangs during the journey. The other will give you strength. Eat them both just before you leave. They're not as good as fresh prey, but the taste won't last long."

"Thanks, Spottedleaf," says Firepaw. She handed one to each of us. When She touched Firepaw's hand, hers lingered. She pulled away and smiled at us.

"Have a safe journey," she murmured.

"Well, I just hope these herbs don't taste too revolting!" muttered Graypaw.

"Well, we have to eat them," I inspect mine. It looked like chewed-up lettuce. I scrunch my nose and set it down on the wooden table.

"It must be a long way to the Moonstone. We've never been given herbs before. Do you know where it is?" I asked.

"Beyond Clan territory, at a place called HighStones. It lies deep underground, in a cave we call Mothermouth."

"Have you ever been there before?" Firepaw asked.

"No, but all apprentices have to make the journey there before they become warriors." The thought of becoming a warrior made my eyes gleam with excitement, and I couldn't help standing a little taller.

"Don't get your hopes up. We still have to finish our training!" Graypaw warned, as if reading my thoughts.

Firepaw looked up through the canopy of leaves at the stars glittering in the black sky above. Moonhigh had passed. "We should get some sleep," he says.

We parted our ways and I could barely believe it. I was going to Moonstone!

Moonstone

[image]

Nothing hurts more than trying not to cry

[image]

♛♛♛

Tigerclaw

I stalked into the Apprentice den and went straight to Firepaw's room. Stupid human. I leaned against the doorframe and crossed my elbows. I watched him intently as he thrashed in his covers. Poor Firepaw having a nightmare. He opened his eyes and gasped for breath.

"Something wrong, Firepaw?" I tilt my head, as if mocking him.

"Just a dream," he mumbled.

I growl at him. "Get ready! We leave shortly!"

Firepaw scrambled out of his bed and hurried to the washroom. I grunt and head towards Blazepaw's room. Sweet, fierce, Blazepaw. Oh, StarClan, how could I ever tell her how much I love her? I didn't fall in love with her at first sight. It was the spirit she had. And the dedication. Like her mother, Fawnstep. I slowly opened the door and went over to her bed. I sat down and brushed some hair out of her face.

I would like to kiss that face, My obnoxious inner-cat says.

She'll freak out when she realizes the whole clan is half cat, I told him scornfully.

So will Firepaw, he says with a cat-like grin.

I don't care about Firepaw! I snarl at him.

He hisses at me then disappears in my mind. Stupid.

I heard that, you- I turned the mind link off.

I inhaled her sweet scent. I just wish she would love me back. I saw a notebook in her hand with a pencil. It looked like she was still sketching it, but it looked like me. She sighs then slowly opens her eyes. The girl with fire in her hair and oceans in her eyes.

"Good morning," I murmur.

"Good morning." She sounded so peaceful. So calm.

She didn't even shrug away from my touch. I caress her cheek with my left hand. As much as I would like to stay like this, I had to put my mentor voice on. "We're going to Moonstone today. You should get ready,"

She looked hurt when I pulled away. I admit, I was hurt too. I stood and walked away, closing the door in the process.

Blazepaw

Tigerclaw left and I was in shock. What just happened to me? I got ready and headed outside. The sky glowed with a new dawn, and dew sparkled on the ferns. It would be a warm day once the sun was up, but the early-morning dampness reminded me that the time of leaf-fall was not far off.

Firepaw, Graypaw, Ravenpaw, and I quickly gulped down the herbs that Spottedleaf had given us. Tigerclaw and Bluestar sat watching us, ready to leave. The rest of the camp was still asleep.

"Ugh!" complained Graypaw. "I knew they'd be bitter. Why couldn't we eat a fat, juicy vole instead?"

"These herbs will keep your hunger at bay longer," answered Bluestar. "And they will make you strong. We have a long journey

ahead of us."

"Have you eaten yours already?" Firepaw asked.

"I cannot eat if I'm going to share dreams with StarClan at the Moonstone tonight," replied Bluestar.

I felt my feet tingle when I heard these words. I was itching to begin the journey. With the dawn's light and the familiar voices. Tigerclaw was still looking at me. Did he regret what he did this morning? He sounded so soft and caring, just like the night I had my nightmare. Lionheart strolled up to us with his hands jammed in his pockets.

"Safe journey," he smiled.

Bluestar nodded. "And I trust you can keep the camp safe while I'm gone,"

Lionheart turned towards Graypaw. "Remember your almost a warrior. Don't forget what I taught you,"

"I'd never forget, Lionheart," he smiles and nudges Lionheart playfully.

We boarded our horses and galloped out of the entrance.

We retraced their route to Fourtrees. This was the quickest way to pass into WindClan territory. HighStones lay beyond. As Firepaw and I bounded down the side of the glade toward the Great Rock, we could still smell the scents of last night's Gathering. We followed the others through the grassy clearing and up the slope on the other side, into WindClan territory. The bushy slope became steeper as they climbed, and rockier, until the horses had to leap from boulder to boulder up the side of a craggy cliff face.

Firepaw and I paused when they reached the top. Ahead of them, the ground flattened out into a wide plateau. The wind blew in a steady gust that rippled the grass and bent the trees. The soil was stony, and outcroppings of bare rock dotted the landscape here and there.

The air still carried the scents of WindClan, but they were stale. Much fresher, and more alarming, were the pungent markings of ShadowClan warriors

"All Clans are entitled to safe passage to the Moonstone, but ShadowClan seems to have no respect for the warrior code anymore, so be alert," warned Bluestar. "We mustn't hunt outside our territory, though. We'll follow the warrior code, even if ShadowClan doesn't."

We set off across the plateau as the sun rose into the sky, following the tracks through the heather. Firepaw had grown used to living under a canopy of trees. The day was hot and I could feel the sun burning my neck. I was thankful for the steady breeze blowing from the forest behind.

Suddenly Tigerclaw stopped dead. "Watch out!" he hissed. "I smell a ShadowClan patrol."

Me and the others lifted their noses, and sure enough, the scent of ShadowClan warriors traveled on the wind.

"They are upwind. They won't know we are here if we keep moving," says Bluestar. "But we must hurry. If they move ahead they'll detect us. It's not far to the edge of WindClan territory now."

We moved on quickly, leaping over the rocks, pushing our way through the sweet-smelling heather. Every few steps, I sniffed the air and glanced over my shoulder, on the lookout for the ShadowClan patrol. But gradually the odor grew fainter and fainter.

They must've left, I thought with relief.

Finally, we reached the edge of the uplands. The landscape changed dramatically, shaped and altered beyond recognition by Humans. Wide earth tracks crisscrossed green and golden meadows, small woods dotted the land, and houses were scattered here and there among the fields. In the distance, I saw a familiar wide, gray path, and an acid tang that stung my throat drifted on the breeze.

"Is that the Thunderpath?" Firepaw asked Graypaw.

"Yep," he says, "It runs all the way through ShadowClan territory. Can you see HighStones?"

"So we have to cross it?" I ask and Graypaw nods.

"Come on!" Bluestar says, "If we keep the pace, we'll be at the HighStones at moonhigh,"

She galloped down the slope with Tigerclaw and the rest trailing behind. As we galloped the wind rushed through my hair. I knew Midnight loved it. To stretch her legs beyond the Clan border. We slowed to a walk since we were close to the houses. A sudden barrage of barking and snarling made us spin around.

Tigerclaw's eyes glowed a strange yellow color. A deep growl rumbled in his throat. Bluestar gave him a warning look.

"T-tigerclaw! Your eyes!" I stutter.

He snaps his head towards me and his eye color turned to the normal amber. I look at him with confusion and we keep moving.

Why did his eyes glow? I wonder to myself.

I shook my head and we moved on. The sun was beginning to sink by the time we reached the Thunderpath. Bluestar signaled to us to stop and wait beneath a hedge. My eyes and throat stinging from the fumes, Firepaw and I watched as the cars flashed to and fro in front of us.

"We'll go one at a time," says Tigerclaw. "Ravenpaw, you first."

"No, Tigerclaw," Bluestar interrupted. "I shall go first. Don't forget, this will be the first time of crossing for the apprentices. Let them see how it is done."

"I know how to cross a road," I scoff.

"I'm not talking to you. I'm talking to Graypaw and Ravenpaw," Bluestar seethed.

Bluestar strolled up to the road casually and when the next car

passed, she cantered across.

"Off you go, Ravenpaw; now you've seen how it's done," says Tigerclaw.

Ravenpaw's eyes widened and his horse stomped. I knew he was scared. "Why don't I go with him?" I ask Tigerclaw.

"He needs to learn on his own!" he snarled at me.

My eyes widen with shock. I didn't expect him to be this mad about this morning. And he was the one that started it.

It was quiet, but Ravenpaw hesitated.

"Go!" hissed Tigerclaw from the hedge.

With a kick, Ravenpaw galloped over to Bluestar. Graypaw was lucky. A long lull let him cross safely.

"Go on, then," growled Tigerclaw.

Firepaw and I went to the edge and made sure nothing was coming. Then we galloped to the other side. Since Midnight was a Thoroughbred, it only took her one stride to get across. As we approached the foot of HighStones, the grass gave way to bare, rocky soil, dotted with patches of heather. The land sloped up now, toward the sky. Craggy rocks topped the slope, blazing orange in the sun.

Bluestar stopped once more. She chose a sun-warmed rock to sit upon, flat and wide enough for all five people to rest side by side.

"Look," she said, tilting her head toward the dark slope before them. "Mothermouth."

Firepaw and I peered upward. The glare of the setting sun blinded us, and the slope was engulfed in shadow. We waited in silence. Gradually, as the sun dropped down behind HighStones, Firepaw and I began to make out the cave entrance, a square black hole that yawned darkly beneath a stone archway.

"We'll wait here until the moon is higher," says Bluestar. "You should hunt if you are hungry and then get some rest."

I was relieved to get some food. Tigerclaw followed me.

"Why are you following me?" I ask cautiously.

There was something off about him. Something not-so-human like. "What you saw with my eyes. I can explain that," He murmurs nervously.

I waited for him to speak. "We are not what you think, Blazepaw. We're not humans."

"But you are! You are a two-legged thing that is talking to me. You are a human. You can't possibly not be a human." I tried to convince myself and Tigerclaw.

He ignored my comment. "We're half cats. We can transform into cats. And if you don't believe me, then I guess I'll have to show you,"

In a swift movement, he leaped into the air, and halfway through, he transformed into a cat. I opened my mouth to shriek but nothing came out. I pressed against a tree and stared at what looked like Tigerclaw.

Tigerclaw's POV:

She truly looked scared. I did consider myself scary in my cat form because I'm 4 ft., my claws are about 5 inches long, and my smoldering amber eyes. She looked like she wanted to cry.

Make yourself look cute, Bluestar mindlinked me.

I don't do cute! I growl at her.

I sat down and inspected her.

Then talk to her, She says then disappears.

"Now do you believe me?" I ask.

"Y-your a-" She choked on her words.

I could hear her heart. It sounded like she had just run a marathon. She shivered and my instinct kicked in. I rubbed my cheek on her chest and started purring. She stopped breathing heavily and started to rub between my ears. Careful not to break anything, I gently picked her up and placed her on my back.

She squealed and we walked back to HighStones. I part of me wonders if she can fully transform into the cat form. The other part of me wonders if she can't fully transform. She told me that her father was a Human, which means she might not have an inner-cat. I worry that her first time transforming would really hurt because she's a hybrid. Blazepaw held onto my neck fur as I trotted back to Bluestar and the others.

If she can't fully transform, you're going to have to bite her, my annoying inner-cat informs me.

I know that already, I growl at him.

She didn't act like she had an inner-cat. Her eyes never changed colors and her canines never grew when she was mad. And it didn't smell like she had an inner-cat.

You would have to bite Firepaw too, he says with a cheshire grin.

Ew, I'm not going to bite him! I spat.

We got back to HighStones where Firepaw was watching with wide eyes. Bluestar told him she would explain later. Blazepaw hopped off my back and I transform into my human form.

We ate in silence. Bluestar stood up and announced, "Come. It is time,"

Rats!

Chapter 10

If you get hurt*, *hurt 'em back*, *If you get killed*... *Walk it off*- *Captain America

[image]

♛♛♛

Blazepaw

Bluestar stood and began to pad toward Mothermouth. Tigerclaw walked beside her, matching her strides step for step.

"Come on, Ravenpaw!" called Graypaw.

Ravenpaw was still sitting on the rock, staring up at the rocks. At Graypaw's words, he stood up and followed slowly. Both Firepaw and I realized he hadn't said a word the whole journey. Maybe he was nervous. Who knows.

It took the cats only a few moments to reach Mothermouth. Firepaw and I stood on the threshold and peered inside. The blackness beyond the stone archway was darker than the cloudiest night. I narrowed my eyes, trying to see where the tunnel led, but I couldn't see a thing. Even with my awesome eyesight, I couldn't see a thing.

Beside us, Graypaw and Ravenpaw craned their heads nervously around the entrance. Even Tigerclaw seemed unsettled by the black hole ahead of them.

"How will we find our way in such darkness?" he asked.

"Follow my scent," Bluestar said as she transformed into her cat

form. "Ravenpaw and Graypaw, you will guard the entrance. Tigerclaw, Firepaw, and Blazepaw will accompany me."

Tigerclaw transformed as well. His tail swept over my stomach. I got hold of his neck fur and swung my leg over his back. Tigerclaw shook his mighty head and padded after Bluestar. With a brief nod to the other apprentices, Firepaw followed.

Halfway there, he made a grunting sound and it tickled my legs because of the vibration. I covered my mouth to smother my giggles. The farther we got in the tunnel the colder it got. I hugged onto Tigerclaw's warm fur. He must've sensed my shivers because he fluffed his fur twice its size.

We were walking along a tunnel that sloped down and down, winding first one way and then the other. I could hear Tigerclaw's whiskers brushing the side of the cave, telling him where to walk and where to turn. Firepaw was right behind Bluestar. Once in a while, she would brush her tail against his hand to tell him she was still there.

I could smell peat, and prey, and the scent of heather. There must be a hole somewhere in the roof of the tunnel.

"Where are we?" I ask into the darkness.

"We've entered the cavern of the Moonstone," replied Bluestar's soft voice, "Wait here. It will be Moonhigh soon."

Suddenly, in a flash more blinding than the setting sun, the cave was lit up. Firepaw and I's eyes were wide open after the blackness of the tunnel. I closed them quickly against the cold, white light. Then slowly I opened them into tiny slits and peered ahead.

We saw a gleaming rock, which glittered as if it were made from countless dewdrops. I gasped at its beauty. In the cold light reflected from the stone, I could make out the shadowy edges of a high-roofed cavern. The Moonstone rose from the middle of the floor, three tail-lengths high.

Bluestar was staring upward, her fur bleached white in the glow of

the Moonstone. Even Tigerclaw's dark pelt shone silver. Firepaw and I followed Bluestar's gaze. High in the roof was an opening that revealed a narrow triangle of the night sky. The moon was casting a beam of light through the hole, down onto the Moonstone, making it sparkle like a star.

I hopped off Tigerclaw's back and watched. Beside me, I smelled Tigerclaw's fear-scent growing, until it became overpowering. I felt startled. Could the warrior see something else here, something dangerous? I saw a flash of movement, felt fur rush past me, and heard the fleeing pawsteps of Tigerclaw racing back to the entrance.

"Firepaw? Blazepaw?" Bluestar said in a calm voice.

"Yeah?" We both say at the same time.

Blood roared in my ears as I waited for her to answer.

"Bluestar?" Firepaw whispered nervously.

"It is alright young warriors; don't be afraid." Bluestar murmured, letting her paws graze the Moonstone.

"I think Tigerclaw was surprised by the power of the Moonstone. In the world above, Tigerclaw is a fearless and mighty warrior, but down here, where the spirits of StarClan speak, cats and people need a different kind of strength. What do you feel?"

"Only my own curiosity," Firepaw murmured.

I hum in agreement. "That's good," She murmured.

Spellbound, Firepaw and I watched as Bluestar padded up to the stone and lay down beside it. She reached her head forward and touched the Moonstone with her nose. Her blue eyes sparkled with its reflection for a moment before she closed them. Occasionally, her paws would twitch and she would mutter something under her breath.

Firepaw and I waited. The chill was not so intense here, but still, we found ourselves shivering. We had no idea how much time had passed, but suddenly the rock stopped glowing. The cavern was

plunged into darkness once more. Firepaw and I looked up to the opening in the roof of the cavern. The moon had passed on, out of sight. All that remained were tiny stars shimmering in blackness.

Firepaw and I could just make out the pale shape of our leader, lying beside the Moonstone. It looked like he wanted to call out her name, but did not dare break the silence.

After more endless moments, she spoke to him. "Firepaw? Blazepaw? Are you still there?" Her voice sounded remote and agitated.

I felt sudden dread in my stomach. Something was wrong. My ears started ringing and I couldn't hear a word Bluestar or Firepaw was saying. My breathing picked up and I raced out as fast as I could.

I burst out of the tunnel and collapsed on my knees, trying to catch my breath. I ignored everybody's shouts and boarded Midnight with no hesitation. Tigerclaw stood in front of me.

"We must return to camp immediately," both Bluestar and I say.

We share the same look that said 'The clan is in danger!'

I quickly galloped into the field. I could hear Firepaw, Graypaw, and Ravenpaw talking but I paid no notice. I could tell by the way Midnight was prancing, she was agitated too.

Ahead, Tigerclaw and Bluestar had jumped the fence, out of the cornfield. We followed, jumping over the fence, onto an earth track. It was the path that led past the house and the dogs. I looked up and saw Bluestar and Tigerclaw trotting tirelessly together, silhouetted against a skyline tinged with red. The sun would be rising soon.

"Look!" Firepaw called to Graypaw and Ravenpaw.

An unfamiliar cat had jumped out in front of the two warriors.

"It's a loner!" hissed Graypaw. The three apprentices hurried forward.

The stranger was a stout black-and-white tom, shorter than the warriors, but well-muscled.

"This is Barley," Bluestar explained to the apprentices as they caught up. "He lives near this Human nest."

I'm surprised I could understand cat language.

"Hi!" meowed the cat. "I haven't seen any of your Clan for some moons. How are you, Bluestar?"

"I'm well, thank you," replied Bluestar. "And you, Barley? How's the prey been running since we last passed this way?"

"Not so bad," replied Barley, with an amiable gleam in his eye. "One good thing about Humans—you'll always find plenty of rats nearby." The black-and-white tom went on: "You seem in more of a hurry than usual. Is everything all right?"

Tigerclaw looked at Barley. A growl rumbled deep in his chest. His eyes flashed yellow again and he bared his pointed teeth.

Bluestar ignored him and continued to talk. "I don't like to be away from my clan too long," She answered smoothly.

"As always, Bluestar, you are tied to your Clan like a queen to her kids," observed Barley, not unkindly.

"What is it you want, Barley?" Tigerclaw seethed through his teeth.

Barley flashed him a reproachful look. "I just wanted to warn you that there are two dogs here now. You'd be safer going back into the cornfield instead of past the yard."

"We saw them earlier-" he began impatiently.

"We're grateful for the warning," Bluestar says, "Thank you, Barley. Until next time..."

Barley flicked his tail. "Have a safe journey," he meowed as he bounded away up the track.

"Come," ordered Bluestar, heading off the track. She pushed her way through the long grass between the path and the fence that led back into the cornfield. The four of us followed, but Tigerclaw hesitated.

"You trust the word of a loner?" he asked.

Bluestar stopped and turned to face him. "Would you rather face those dogs?"

"They were tied up," Tigerclaw pointed out.

I lost my patience quickly. "If Bluestar trusts Barley so should you! I don't understand why we're making a big fuss out of it!"

Everybody watches me with wide eyes. I scowl and moved on. By now, the sun had lifted its head above the horizon. The hedgerows sparkled with dew, promising another warm day.

We padded along the edge of the ditch. I looked down into the deep gully, steep-sided and filled with nettles. I could smell prey-scent. There was something familiar about the bitter odor, but it was one I hadn't smelled for a long time. I heard a neigh and turned my head to see Ravenpaw's horse being dragged into the ditch by mounds of rats.

"Rats!" spat Tigerclaw. "Barley has sent us into a trap!"

Huge brown rats swarmed out of the ditch, squeaking shrilly. We dismounted our horses and faced the ugly rodents. Suddenly one leaped on my back. I shrieked and ripped it off my back. One lept onto Firepaw's shoulder and he aggressively tore it off. One attacked my foot and I kicked it away. I let out a cry as one dug its teeth deep into my arm.

I plucked one by one off my body. Bluestar was being buried alive by rats. Yowls, hisses, and spits told me that the others were also being attacked. One lept onto Midnight's neck and she reared, letting out a shriek. I ripped it off and I felt another attacking my back.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of white fur. For a

moment I was confused; then I felt the rat being dragged off me. I spun around to see Barley flinging the rodent into the ditch.

Without hesitating, Barley glanced around and sprinted over to Bluestar. She was writhing on the path, covered in rats. In a flash Barley had the spine of one between his teeth and was plucking it off her with practiced ease. He spat it onto the ground and grabbed another in his mouth as Bluestar thrashed beneath him.

Firepaw rushed over to Graypaw, who was being attacked from both sides by two smaller rats. Firepaw lunged at the nearest one, giving it a hit that left it dead. Graypaw managed to turn and pin down the other with his claws. He grabbed it with his teeth and flung it into the ditch as hard as he could. It did not come back.

"They're running away!" Tigerclaw yowled.

Sure enough, the remaining rats were fleeing down into the safety of the ditch. I Inspected my arm. It was already swelling. Now I looked for Bluestar. I saw Barley first, standing at the top of the ditch, scanning the depths for more rats. Bluestar was lying on the path nearby. Alarmed, I dashed to my leader's side. The thick gray fur at the back of her neck was drenched with blood.

I felt bile rise in my throat and I prayed myself not to be sick. My body betrayed me and I turned away from everybody. I retched mostly water and the herbs Spottedleaf had given me yesterday. I felt Tigerclaw collect my hair and give me a handkerchief to wipe my mouth.

Suddenly, Tigerclaw left my side and pinned Barley with an angry yowl. His eyes were completely red and his sharpened teeth were only inches from Barley's neck.

"You sent us into a trap!" he snarled.

"I didn't know the rats were here!" spat Barley, his paws scrabbling in the dust as he struggled to stand up.

"Why did you send us this way?!?" hisses Tigerclaw.

"The dogs!"

"The dogs were tied when we passed them earlier!"

"The Human unties them at night. They guard his nest," Barley panted, wheezing under the weight of Tigerclaw's massive paws.

"Tigerclaw! Bluestar is injured!" Firepaw burst out.

I spun around and saw Bluestar lying on the ground. She wasn't moving. I crawled over to her and held onto her shoulders.

"Bluestar! Wake up! It's over!" I try to say.

Tigerclaw released Barley at once. Barley got up and shook the dust from his coat. The great warrior bounded over to Bluestar's side and sniffed her wounds.

"Is there anything we can do?" Firepaw asked.

"She is in the hands of StarClan now," says Tigerclaw solemnly, stepping back.

She went limp in my arms and I started crying. I begged her to wake up but it was useless. Tigerclaw had to drag me away. I screamed and kicked as he took me away from her.

"NO!" I shrieked and tried to fling myself at her.

I stopped struggling and balled his t-shirt in my fists. I sobbed and buried my head in the crook of his shoulder. Bluestar's eyes were open but glazed, and her gray body lay motionless. She didn't even appear to be breathing. That made me cry even harder.

Firepaw realized that I was having a panic attack. Tigerclaw handed me over to Firepaw. He simply rubbed my back and told me to let it out. Then Bluestar stirred. The end of her tail twitched and she lifted her head.

"Blazepaw look!" Firepaw whispered into my ear.

I spun around and saw Bluestar looking at me. I collapsed beside her and smashed her in a hug. "Don't do that again!"

"I won't" she croaked then hisses.

I immediately let go and inspected her wound.

"Right," Tigerclaw said in a commanding tone. "Ravenpaw, fetch bandages for Bluestar's wounds. Graypaw, find marigold or horsetail." Ravenpaw started searching through his bag. "Barley, I think you should leave us now."

Firepaw and I looked over to the loner who had fought so bravely to help us. I wanted to thank him, but under Tigerclaw's fierce gaze, I didn't dare. Instead of speaking, I gave Barley a tiny smile. Barley seemed to understand, for he nodded in return and left without another word.

Bluestar was still lying on the dirt track. "Is everyone all right?" she asked hoarsely.

Tigerclaw nodded.

Ravenpaw sat beside Bluestar with a bandage in his hand.

"I don't understand why somebody would shove it in the bottom of the bag," he muttered.

"Shall I put it on her wounds?" Firepaw suggested. "Yellowfang taught me how."

"Very well," agreed Tigerclaw. He walked away and scanned the ditch again.

Firepaw got me to rest her head on my knees while he put the bandages on.

She winced under his touch. "If it had not been for Tigerclaw, those rats would have eaten me alive," she murmured, her voice tight with pain.

Firepaw and I shared a look. I looked over to Tigerclaw, who had his focus on the ditch. "Tigerclaw didn't save you. Barley did." I whispered.

"Barley?" Bluestar sounded surprised. "Is he here?"

"No. Tigerclaw sent him away." Firepaw murmured.

"And what do you think?" she rasped.

He was so concentrated on the wound he hadn't looked up. "Barley is a loner. What would he gain by sending us into a trap only to rescue us from it?" he said at last.

Bluestar laid down her head and closed her eyes again. Graypaw returned with some horsetail. Firepaw chewed the leaves and spat the juice onto Bluestar'swounds.

"We should rest here while Bluestar recovers," announced Tigerclaw, padding up.

"No!" both Bluestar and I say.

For a second, I thought we had telepathy.

"Let's keep going." We got back on our horses and rode into the field.

Nothing would stop me from getting back to my clan. Not now. Not ever. I *am* a true ThunderClan warrior.

Battle

[image] [image]

Chapter 11
How can I say goodbye if I haven't gotten to say hello?

[image]

♛♛♛

"Don't worry about ShadowClan warriors," she meowed through gritted teeth as Tigerclaw paused to sniff the air. "You won't find any here today."

I felt dread in my stomach. We picked our way carefully down the steep, rocky hillside that led to Fourtrees and joined the familiar trail that led home.

"I can still smell the stench of ShadowClan," Graypaw muttered to Firepaw as they trekked through ThunderClan's hunting grounds.

"Perhaps the breeze has carried it down from WindClan's territory," Firepaw suggested.

I could hear the cries in the distance. The clan needs me. With a kick, Midnight galloped to the camp. I got into the entrance and saw ShadowClan everywhere.

I searched the crowd. I twisted my head and saw Mom, looking straight at me, nodding. I nod back and I let out a battle cry. Midnight reared on her hind legs and whinnied. I hopped off and started fighting. I could already see Bluestar, Firepaw, Tigerclaw, Ravenpaw, and Graypaw fight with ThunderClan.

I saw a group of men with the guy that tried to touch me among them. I whistled to get their attention. "Let's have some fun... Shall we?"

(I don't really know how to explain a fight scene so just go to the top and skip to 1:15 to watch)

Firepaw looked over at me once he got done fighting a guy and said, "I got 'em!" His smile dropped when he saw I had about eight full-grown men rolling on the ground groaning.

Every corner of the camp seemed alive with warriors. I could see Frostfur and Goldenflower clawing and biting at a huge gray cat. Even the young tabby queen Brindleface was fighting, though she was very close to kitting. Darkstripe was locked in a fierce tussle with a black warrior. Three of the elders, Smallear, Patchpelt, and One-eye, were nipping bravely at a tortoiseshell that fought with twice their speed and ferocity.

Suddenly, I was dragged away from the crowd. I tried screaming but he smacked me and told me to shut up. He ripped my jacket off and rolled my sleeve up. He got a knife out and started writing on my arm. As much as I screamed, kicked, and punched, he never stopped. Once he got done he sat up and smirked.

"That's what you get you bitch!" And with that, he lept away.

My vision blurred with tears and I looked at the smudged writing: *Filthy half-blood*.

I dragged myself to the middle of the camp where Lionheart was lying. "Lionheart," I whisper, shaking him frantically. I looked up and saw Whitestorm and Darkstripe chasing the last two intruders out of the camp, sending them off with a few extra scratches and bites.

"B-blazepaw," he croaked, clutching onto my hair.

"It's okay. I'm here," I whisper.

"T-tell Graypaw that I-I'll be watching h-him from St-tarClan,"

"Lionheart, it isn't your time. You're too young," I clutched his shirt.

"Fawnstep a-and I are-e w-watching-g over yo-"

His body went limp between my arms. I lifted my head to the sky and screamed. I buried my head in his chest and cried. Everybody turned their heads towards me and Graypaw collapsed beside him. For the first time, I'd seen Graypaw cry. Frostfur and Goldenflower went on his other side and started crying as well.

"He's gone! He's gone!" Graypaw cried.

"No! No! Please take him back!" I begged StarClan but they ignored me.

Graypaw and I's pleas for him to wake were useless. Bluestar waited until the other cats had left before padding quietly up. Graypaw and I didn't even seem to notice our leader's presence. Firepaw looked away as Bluestar spoke her last words to her old friend.

"Oh, what am I going to do without you, Lionheart?" she whispered. Then she limped back to her cabin and crouched down outside, staring grief-stricken into the distance. She didn't even try to lick clean her bloody, matted fur. It was the first time I had seen her look utterly defeated, and I felt a chill run through me.

I sat with Graypaw and Lionheart until the moon rose high. Ravenpaw joined us. Tigerclaw strode over and briefly talked to Lionheart. To my confusion, his eyes seemed to be fixed on Ravenpaw rather than the fallen deputy.

Spottedleaf padded lightly around the camp, tending to wounds and battered nerves. I watched her approach Bluestar twice, but each time the leader sent her away to see to the others. Only when Spottedleaf had attended to the wounds of all the other cats did Bluestar allow her to treat her bites and scratches. When Spottedleaf came towards me, I dismissed her.

I looked at my forearm. Tigerclaw got up and told me to get up too. I covered my wounds and Tigerclaw took me straight to Spottedleaf. She started wiping off the excess blood and she gasped at what she saw.

"What? What is it?" Tigerclaw looked up sharply.

Bluestar looked at me with concern. Spottedleaf held my arm out so both of them could see.

"Do you know what this means?" Spottedleaf asked me and I shook my head.

"It means dirty blood. It indicates you have Human blood." Spottedleaf murmured.

"It's time we *officially* introduced Firepaw and Blazepaw to the clan." Bluestar sighed. When Tigerclaw saw my confused face he explained.

"Full-bloods like us, can fully transform into the cat form. Our eyes glow when we have certain emotions and our claws extend when we're angry," he continued, "Half-bloods only have good hearing, eyesight, smell, and speed."

"Firepaw is a human. For instance, if Bluestar bit him, he would become a full-blood." Spottedleaf said.

"So if you bit me, I would become a full-blood?" I look at Tigerclaw.

He nods. Once Spottedleaf was done, she retreated to her cabin. Bluestar looked at me. "It's nearly moonhigh, and I have to pick a new deputy. We will do the ceremony then,"

Bluestar lept onto the High Rock.

"It is nearly moonhigh," says Bluestar. "And it is once more my duty —much, much too soon—to name ThunderClan's new deputy." Her voice was tired and cracked with sadness.

Firepaw and I looked from warrior to warrior. They were all looking expectantly at Tigerclaw. Even Whitestorm had turned to watch the dark tabby. From the bold expression on his face, and the way his whiskers twitched in anticipation, Tigerclaw seemed to agree with them.

Bluestar took a deep breath and continued. "I say these words before the body of Lionheart, so that his spirit may hear and approve my choice." She hesitated. "I have not forgotten how one

cat avenged the death of Redtail and brought his body back to us. ThunderClan needs this fearless loyalty even more now." Bluestar paused again and then meowed the name loud and clear.

"Tigerclaw will be the new deputy of ThunderClan."

There was a yowl of approval, with the loudest voices belonging to Darkstripe and Longtail. Whitestorm sat calmly, his eyes closed, his tail wrapped neatly around him. He was nodding slowly and approvingly. Since my throat was dry from all the screaming and crying, I just clapped.

Tigerclaw lifted his chin proudly, his eyes half-closed as he listened to the Clan. Then he stalked through the crowd, accepting tributes with the smallest of nods, and leaped up onto the Highrock beside Bluestar.

"ThunderClan," he yowled, "I am honored to accept the position of Clan deputy. I never expected to gain such high rank, but by the spirit of Lionheart, I vow to serve you as best I can."

He gravely dipped his head, fixing the crowd with his wide amber eyes, and jumped down from the Highrock. When he got on the ground he transformed back into the human form.

Bluestar carried on. "Two days ago, Blazepaw and Firepaw have found out we are transformers. We all know Blazepaw's father was a Human, therefore, she is a half-blood."

Murmurs of agreement swept through the crowd. "Firepaw and Blazepaw are ready to become one of us!" Bluestar said finally.

"Come forward," says Bluestar.

Firepaw and I came forward slowly. "Firepaw, are you ready to become a full-blood?"

"Yes," his voice trembled a little, but he stayed strong.

Bluestar grabbed his wrist and lifted it to her mouth. She sunk her pointed teeth deep into his skin. He didn't even flinch. She licked up the mess and it disappeared. She turned to me.

"Blazepaw, are you ready to become a full-blood?"

My heart thumped against my chest as I searched for my words. "Yes,"

She was about to sink her teeth into my skin when Tigerclaw stopped her. "Perhaps it'd be best if I did it. I mean look at her face. She is practically a ghost. I think she wants someone more...gentle."

Bluestar looked surprised at first and it looked like she was going to object, but when she saw his pleading face she nodded slowly. He lifted my wrist to his mouth and gently bit down. His teeth sunk deeper and I let out a small cry. He pulled out and licked the blood off my wrist. It was still a little red from the bite mark but you couldn't tell.

I flashed Tigerclaw a grateful look and went over to Firepaw. I heard them whispering. Firepaw looked worried.

"Are you talking about Tigerclaw?" Firepaw whispered.

"He's wanted to be deputy ever since he took care of Redtail—" Ravenpaw said. He stopped abruptly.

"Took care of Redtail?" Firepaw echoed.

"What?" I question.

"Are you telling Firepaw how I saved Redtail?"

Ravenpaw whipped around, eyes wide with fear. I gasped and spun around as well. Tigerclaw loomed over us as if we were prey.

Firepaw jumped up and faced the new deputy. "He was just saying he wished you had been here to take care of Lionheart as well, that's all!"

Tigerclaw looked from one to the other, then stalked away in silence. Ravenpaw's green eyes clouded with terror, and he started to tremble uncontrollably.

"Ravenpaw?" I say in alarm.

But Ravenpaw didn't even look up at me. With his head held low, he slunk back to Graypaw and crouched next to him, pressing his skinny black body next to Graypaw's thick fur as if he was suddenly cold. I joined them. As the moon passed overhead, other cats came to join their vigil.

She stared at Lionheart and never blinked. It started to freak me out. At dawn, a group of elders came to take Lionheart's body away to the burial place. Graypaw followed to help dig the hole where the great warrior would rest. I yawned and stretched. I felt chilled to the bone. Leaf-fall was nearly here now, and the woods were clouded with mist, but above the leaves, I saw a rosy morning sky. I watched Graypaw disappear into the dew-soaked undergrowth with the elders.

Ravenpaw jumped to his feet and hurried back to the apprentices' den. Firepaw and I followed slowly. When I got to my bedroom I didn't bother to take my clothes off. I got under the covers and went into a dreamless sleep.

"Wake up!" Dustpaw's voice came from my door.

I groaned and got up. I probably looked like I fought with a raccoon. I hopped out of bed, showered, brushed my hair and teeth, and headed outside. My stomach rumbled hungrily. I'd have to hunt today. I hurried over to Firepaw.

Tigerclaw was speaking from his position beside Bluestar. "During the battle, our leader lost another life. Now that she has only four of her nine lives left, I am going to appoint a bodyguard to stay at her side constantly. No person or cat will be allowed to approach her unless the guards are present." His amber eyes flicked toRavenpaw and then back to the rest of the crowd. "Darkstripe and Longtail," he continued, turning his gaze on the warriors, "you will act as Bluestar's guards."

I rolled my eyes. He was being an idiot. Darkstripe and Longtail nodded importantly and sat taller. Bluestar now spoke. Her voice sounded gentle and calming after her deputy's commanding yowl.

"Thank you, Tigerclaw, for your loyalty. But the Clan must

understand that I am still here for them. No person or cat should hesitate to approach me, and I am happy to speak to anyone with or without my bodyguards." Her eyes darted briefly in Tigerclaw's direction. "As the warrior code says, the safety of the Clan is more important than the security of any single member." She paused, and her sky-blue gaze rested briefly on Firepaw and I. "And now, I wish to invite Yellowfang to join ThunderClan."

Words of surprise rose from some of the warriors. Bluestar looked at Frostfur, who nodded her agreement. The other queens looked on silently.

Bluestar continued. "Her actions last night proved that she is brave and loyal. If she wishes it, we would welcome her as a full member of this Clan."

From her place at the edge of the crowd, Yellowfang looked up at the Clan leader and murmured, "I am honored, Bluestar, and I accept your offer."

"Good," meowed Bluestar, her voice firm as if the matter was now closed.

Firepaw and I smiled. We were surprised to realize just how much Bluestar'spublic show of trust in Yellowfang meant to us. Bluestar began to speak again.

"Last night we successfully defended ourselves against ShadowClan, but they are still a great threat. The repair work we began this morning will continue. Our boundaries will be patrolled constantly. We must not assume that the war is over."

Tigerclaw stood up, his tail held high, and glared down at the assembled cats and people.

"ShadowClan attacked while we were away from camp," he growled. "They chose their moment well. How did they know that the camp was so poorly defended? Do they have eyes inside our camp?"

Firepaw and I froze in horror as Tigerclaw fixed his cold stare on

Ravenpaw. Some of the cats followed their new deputy's gaze and stared in puzzlement at the black apprentice. Ravenpaw looked at the ground and shifted his paws nervously.

Tigerclaw went on.

"We still have a while before sunset. We must concentrate on rebuilding our camp. Meanwhile, if you suspect anything or anyone, tell me. Be assured, anything you say will be in confidence." He nodded to dismiss the Clan, then turned and began murmuring to Bluestar.

The cats separated and began to move around the camp, assessing damage and forming workgroups. I after Tigerclaw had bitten me, I've felt a little more energetic.

"Ravenpaw!" Firepaw called. But Ravenpaw had already bounded away. Firepaw and I could see him offering to help Halftailand Whitestorm, before rushing off to collect twigs so they could patch the holes in the boundary wall. Ravenpaw clearly didn't want to talk.

"Let's go and help him," suggested Graypaw. His voice was flat and exhausted, and his eyes were dull.

"You go. I'll be there in a moment," Firepaw answered. "First I want to check on Yellowfang, see if she's okay after her fight with Blackfoot."

I looked for Yellowfang in her nest by the fallen tree. She was stretched out in the shadows, her eyes thoughtful.

"Firepaw, Blazepaw," she purred when she saw us. "I'm glad you have come."

"We wanted to check that you were all right," I say.

"Old habits stay longer than old scents, eh?" meowed Yellowfang with a flash of her old spirit.

"I suppose so," Firepaw confessed. "How are you feeling?"

"This old leg injury is playing up again, but I'll be fine," Yellowfang told us.

"How did you manage to fight Blackfoot off?" I asked, unable to keep the admiration out of my voice.

"Blackfoot's strong, but he's not a clever fighter. Fighting you was more of a challenge."

I looked for humor in her eyes, but there was none.

She continued, "I've known him since he was a kit. He hasn't changed—a bully, but no brains." Suddenly, Firepaw transformed into his cat form and sat down beside Yellowfang.

He must've practiced last night, I thought with realization.

"I'm not surprised Bluestar asked you to join the Clan," he purred. "You certainly showed your loyalty last night."

I stood awkwardly and watched Firepaw talk to Yellowfang. Yellowfang looked at me and narrowed her eyes.

"You don't know how to transform, do you?" she asked.

"No," I mutter.

"Just think of someone in a cat form," Firepaw says.

An image of Tigerclaw's cat pops into my head. I looked down and saw paws.

Hello! A voice said and I screeched.

Everybody looked my way with confusion and they realized I just transformed into my cat form. I crouched low and flattened my ears. Firepaw and Yellowfang looked pleased.

Yellowfang twitched her tail. "Perhaps a truly loyal cat would have fought at the side of the Clan that raised her."

"Then I'd be fighting for my Humans," Firepaw pointed out.

I'm your inner-cat Blazepaw, the voice said again.

Uh, nice to meet you, inner-cat, I say awkwardly.

You can call me Blazepaw or something else, she says.

Okay, I say slowly.

I was so focused on talking with my inner-cat I almost missed out on the whole conversation. "Bet you can't guess who the new ShadowClan medicine cat is?" Firepaw mewed.

"Not Runningnose?" Yellowfang croaked hopefully.

"Yep!"

She shook her head. "He can't even fix his own cold!"

"That's what Graypaw said!" We purred together for a moment, amused. Firepaw and got to our paws. "We'll leave you to rest now. Call me if you need anything else today."

Yellowfang lifted her head. "Before you go, Firepaw, Blazepaw, I hear you were in a rat fight. Did they draw blood?"

"It's okay, Spottedleaf has treated our wounds with marigold," I reply.

"Sometimes marigold is not strong enough for rat bites. Go and find a patch of wild garlic to roll in. I think there's some not far from the camp entrance. That will draw out any poisons the rats may have left. Although," she added dryly, "your den mates might not thank me for my advice!"

"Well, we do. Thanks, Yellowfang!" Firepaw purred.

"Go carefully, young ones." Yellowfang held our gaze for a moment, then let her chin rest on her front paws and closed her eyes.

Firepaw and I slipped under the branches around Yellowfang's nest and headed for the gorse tunnel, in search of the wild garlic. The sun was setting now, and we could hear the queens settling their

kits for the night.

"Where do you think you're going?" growled a voice from the shadows. It was Darkstripe.

"Yellowfang told us to go out and—"

"You don't take orders from that rogue!" hissed the warrior. "Go and help with the repairs. No cat is to leave the camp tonight!" He lashed his tail from side to side.

"Yes, Darkstripe," We muttered in sync.

We turned and I muttered "Dirtstripe!" under my breath, then headed toward the camp boundary, where we could see Graypaw and Ravenpaw busily patching a large hole in the wall of greenery.

"How's Yellowfang?" asked Graypaw as Firepaw and I trotted up.

"She's fine. She said wild garlic would be good for our rat bites. We were on our way to find some, but Darkstripe ordered us to stay in camp," Firepaw told him.

"Wild garlic?" mewed Graypaw. "I wouldn't mind trying that. My leg still stings."

"We get could some!" I offer. "No one would notice if we slipped out of this hole here. It'd only be a couple of rabbit hops,"

Lilypaw came from behind me. "We'll cover for you,"

I looked at her with confusion. Nobody bit her.

"I did," Ravenpaw meowed as if reading my mind.

I jumped in fright. "We also forgot to tell you that we can communicate through our minds," Graypaw says cheesily.

Lilypaw blushes. Awwwww, I think someone has a crush on Ravenpaw! Firepaw nuzzled him gratefully and jumped out through the tear in the boundary wall.

Once outside the camp, we began to make our way to the wild garlic patch, the sharp tang alerting us easily to its location. The moon was rising in the violet sky as the sun sank below the horizon. A cold breeze ruffled our fur. Suddenly I caught a cat-scent carried toward us on the wind. I sniffed cautiously. ShadowClan? No, just Tigerclaw, and two other cats. I sniffed the air again. Darkstripe and Longtail! What were they doing here?

Curious, Firepaw and I dropped into a stalking position. We prowled through the undergrowth paw by paw, keeping downwind so that we were not detected. The warriors were standing in the shadow of a clump of ferns, their heads very close together. Soon Firepaw and I were near enough to hear them speak.

"StarClan knows, my apprentice has shown little promise from the start, but I never expected him to turn traitor!" growled Tigerclaw.

My eyes widened with shock and my fur bristled in horror. It sounded like Tigerclaw intended to do more than just hint that Ravenpaw had betrayed the Clan!

"How long did you say Ravenpaw was missing on the journey to Mothermouth?" asked Darkstripe.

"Long enough to have traveled to ShadowClan's camp and back," came the deputy's menacing answer.

Firepaw's cat made its way into my mind.

It's impossible! He let out an outraged hiss.

He was with us the whole time! My cat agreed.

Longtail's voice sounded now, high-pitched with excitement: "He must have told them that ThunderClan's leader and the strongest warrior had left the camp. Why else would they attack when they did?"

"We are the last Clan to stand against ShadowClan. We must remain strong," purred Tigerclaw. His tone had become velvety soft now. We listened for more.

It was Darkstripe who answered, eagerly, as if he were still Tigerclaw's apprentice, giving the correct answer to a question on hunting techniques. His words made Firepaw and I breathless with fear. "And the Clan would be better off without a traitor like Ravenpaw."

My anger got the best of me and I pushed my way through the ferns. Firepaw grabbed my scruff harshly and dragged me back. He ran his tail along my mouth to shush me.

"I have to say I agree with you, Darkstripe," murmured Tigerclaw, his voice heavy with emotion. "Even though he's my own apprentice..." He trailed off as if he were too upset to say any more.

I couldn't listen anymore. And I thought he actually cared for me! I thought he wasn't so bad! Ravenpaw is innocent! I raced back to the camp with tears in the corners of my eyes.

Tigerclaw was the Clan deputy, a great warrior, and popular with all of the other cats. No one was going to listen to any accusations made by an apprentice. But Ravenpaw was in terrible danger. I shook myself, trying to clear my head. There was only one thing to do—I must tell what I had heard to Bluestar, and somehow convince her that I was telling the truth!

Training lesson

[image] [image]

Chapter 12

The way I see it,if you want a rainbow,you've got to put up with the rain-Dolly Parton

[image]

♛♛♛

Graypaw and Ravenpaw were still patching the hole when Firepaw and I reached them. They had left a gap just wide enough for us to squeeze back through.

"No luck with the garlic," Firepaw panted as he slipped in. "Darkstripe's prowling around out there."

"Never mind," mewed Graypaw. "We can get some tomorrow."

"I'll go and get you some poppy from Spottedleaf," I offered.

"Don't worry," says Graypaw. "I'll be fine."

"It's no trouble," Before Graypaw could protest, I bounded away.

I needed to get my mind off of Tigerclaw. I needed a break. After Lionheart's death, I felt more troubled than ever. When he said that he'd meet my mother in StarClan. Had she passed away without me knowing? Why was he keeping it a secret? Did she tell him not to tell me? When I got to the clearing, Spottedleaf was pacing and her eyes were clouded with unhappiness.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"The spirits of StarClan are restless. I think they are trying to tell me something," she replied, flicking her tail uneasily. "What can I do for

you?"

"Graypaw needs some poppy seed for his leg. I think the rat bites are hurting him," I explained.

"The pain of losing Lionheart will make his injuries feel worse. But he'll mend in time; don't worry. In the meantime, you're right, poppy seeds will help." Spottedleaf went into her den and brought out a dried poppy head. She placed it carefully on the ground. "Just shake out one or two and give them to him," she meowed.

I nodded and picked it between my teeth. I was about to turn when Spottedleaf stopped me.

"Wait," she hissed suddenly.

I looked at her expectantly. Her eyes bored into mine.

"Blazepaw," she hissed. "StarClan spoke to me moons ago, before you joined the Clan. I sense they want me to tell you this now. They said only a blazing fire can save our Clan."

I stare at Spottedleaf, mystified.

The strange passion faded from her eyes. "Take care, Blazepaw," she meowed in her normal voice, and turned away.

A blazing fire? What does that mean?

Your name idiot! my cat hisses at me.

My eyes widened. *Blaze*paw and *Fire*paw. I turned and headed back to Firepaw. I had to tell him what she said. How could we save ThunderClan? We're only apprentices. Surely StarClan must've mistaken?

StarClan doesn't make mistakes! she hisses again.

How could Firepaw and I save the clan alone?

We'd been allowed to rest all morning, after working on repairs for

most of the night. Tigerclaw had ordered them to be ready to begin training at sunhigh. The strong yellow light filtering through to the den told me it was already near that now.

I'd been restless all night. Nightmares about Zach hurting me and a blazing fire. I was in and out all night. The only thing that helped me sleep was to sketch until I got too tired. I got up and got a shower.

I put on my combat outfit and headed outside. I usually had my hair down but since we were training, I put it in a french braid. Tigerclaw was bouncing his knee impatiently as he waited for the others. He caught sight of me and growled.

"At last one of you knows what time is," he spat scornfully.

"Graypaw and Ravenpaw are still resting after the battle," I murmur.

My comment only made Tigerclaw madder. "Does it look I care?!?"

My eyes widened and I took a step back. His eyes instantly shown regret. I've been scolded but never yelled at. It reminded me of how vicious my brother was when he fought. When Mom and Dad weren't home, he'd constantly say I was a mistake. That I was never supposed to happen. I dropped my head and looked at the ground.

"I'm sorry, Blazepaw. I didn't mean to snap at you." Is he bipolar? One second he's 'I'm so blunt' then he's 'I'm so angry!' then he's 'I'm sorry I snapped at you.' Firepaw, Graypaw, and Ravenpaw finally come out of the den.

I glanced at Firepaw once, who had a worried look on his face. "Bluestar will be ready for you in a moment, Firepaw, Blazepaw" announced Tigerclaw.

My anger disappeared into excitement. Finally some battle training! I could tell Tigerclaw was trying to get me to look at him but I wasn't moving my head. He sighed and turned back to the rest.

"Graypaw," continued Tigerclaw, "you can join my training session. Do you think you're up to it, Ravenpaw?" He glowered at his apprentice. "After all, you got some pretty nasty nettle stings while

the rest of us were fighting those rats."

Ravenpaw looked at the ground. "I'm fine," he murmured.

Graypaw and Ravenpaw followed the deputy out of the camp entrance. Ravenpaw's head hung low as he disappeared through the gorse tunnel. Firepaw and I waited for Bluestar to come.

"What happened between you and Tigerclaw?" I could tell the question was nagging at his brain.

"It's ridiculous," I mutter.

Firepaw gave me a stern look and I gave in.

"Tigerclaw snapped at me, that's all," I scrape the ground with my shoe.

"And it reminded you of Zach," Firepaw began slowly.

As soon as he said those words, Bluestar strolled into the clearing. My savior. "Come," she called to us.

"Will your guards be joining us?" I asked cautiously. I've had enough with them.

Bluestar replied without looking back, "I've ordered Darkstripe and Longtail to help with the camp repairs. Securing ThunderClan's base is our priority."

Now was the perfect time to tell Bluestar about Tigerclaw's plans, I thought with triumph.

On the other hand, my cat wasn't so happy about that. Do *you want to blame Tigerclaw? You've had an interest in him lately.*

Go away! I hiss at her.

She can't ruin my chance to save Ravenpaw. When we got to the hollow, it was empty.

"I asked Tigerclaw to hold his training session in another part of the

forest today," Bluestar explained as she padded into the center of the hollow. "I want to concentrate on your fighting skills, and I want you to concentrate on them too—which means no distractions."

Firepaw and I nodded. Firepaw wasn't paying attention and Bluestar tripped him. He stumbled and then collapsed beside my feet.

"Do I have your attention now?" she growled.

As he staggered to his feet, he answered, "Y-yes, Bluestar, sorry!"

"That's better. Firepaw, Blazepaw, you have been with us for many moons now. I have watched you fight. With the rats you were quick; with the ShadowClan warriors, you were fierce. You outwitted Graypaw on that very first day we met, and you defeated Yellowfang with your cleverness too." She paused, then lowered her voice to an intense hiss. "But one day you will meet an opponent who is all of these things as well—quick and fierce and clever. It's my duty to prepare you for that day."

"Let's see how you fight," Bluestar ordered. "Attack me."

Firepaw was inspecting the best way to attack her. In a real battle, you had no time for thinking. You had to trust your ability. I looked at her left side to trick her and lunged to her right side. I hit her weak spot, hooked my calf around hers, and yanked hard. She fell to the ground with an 'Ufff' and then groaned.

"Bluestar? I'm sorry I didn't mean to hurt you," I rushed to her side.

"It's fine. Let Firepaw attack this time," she croaked and slowly pushed herself up.

Firepaw changed into his cat form and Bluestar followed his suit. He had aimed to land squarely on her shoulders, but Bluestar was ready for him. She dropped swiftly into a crouch. As Firepaw hit her, she rolled onto her back. Instead of landing on her shoulders, he went crashing down toward her upturned belly. She caught him with all four paws and flung him easily away from her. He hit the dusty ground hard and lay winded for a moment before

he scrambled to his feet.

It was an interesting strategy but his eyes betrayed him.

"Interesting strategy, but your eyes betrayed where you were aiming," growled Bluestar as she stood up and shook off the dust from her thick coat. "Now, try again."

The rest of the time I was mostly watching because I already had experience with fighting. Bluestar taught me some new things that my mother didn't. We trained 'til sunset. I couldn't wait to tell Ravenpaw and Graypaw! And it wasn't until we reached the camp boundary that I'd realized I'd forgotten to tell Bluestar about Ravenpaw.

By the time Firepaw and I returned, the camp was starting to look a little better. Parties of cats had clearly been patching and repairing continuously throughout the day. Frostfur and Goldenflower were still busy fortifying the nursery walls, but the outer wall looked solid and secure once more.

Firepaw and I trotted across the clearing to see if there was any fresh-kill around. We passed Sandpaw and Dustpaw, who were preparing to leave in the next patrol.

"Sorry," mewed Sandpaw, "We ate the last two mice,"

I shrugged. We would catch something for ourselves later. We headed back to the apprentices' den, where Graypaw was sitting with his back resting against the tree stump, licking a forepaw. Lilypaw was beside him, looking at the camp entrance worriedly.

"That looks pretty deep. You should get Spottedleaf to take a look at it," Firepaw advised. "Where did Tigerclaw send Ravenpaw, by the way?"

At the sound of Tigerclaw's name, my head snapped up.

"Dunno, I was up to my belly in cold water," muttered Graypaw. He stood up and limped away toward Spottedleaf's den.

Lilypaw got up and laid her tail on my shoulders.

"We're gonna have girl talk," she meowed to Firepaw.

He nodded and settled down, gazing at the entrance of the camp. She took me behind some bushes and gave me a look.

"Spill,"

"There's nothing to spill," I say.

"Yes, there is. When Graypaw said Tigerclaw's name you suddenly became more interested in our conversation." her tail flicked from side to side.

"Tigerclaw is a good warrior but I don't love him."

"Gotcha!" she hisses.

I just realized that she didn't say I liked him. She said I was interested in his name. I sighed and flattened my ears.

"How long?"

"Since my first gathering."

"And when was that?"

"1 month ago."

My words were met with silence. She gaped at me then squealed. I cringed visibly. She started bouncing on her paws and repeating, "You have to tell him! You have to tell him!"

I swept my tail over her mouth. "Don't speak a word about this," I hiss.

"Why?!? He might like you back!"

"No! He's like 7 years older than me!"

"But he's ridiculously hot!" she cries.

"I know he is but-"

"YOU ADMIT IT!" she yowls.

Lilypaw lept out of the bushes and raced towards Tigerclaw at full speed.

"LILYPAW! GET BACK HERE, YOU IDIOT!" I yowl, racing after her.

Tigerclaw lept to his feet. I bunched my haunches and leaped at Lilypaw. I grabbed her by the scruff and dragged her away from Tigerclaw, whose eyes were as round as the moon.

"SHE LIKES YOU!" Lilypaw yowled as she scrambled away from my grip.

"Who?" Tigerclaw cried.

"Blazepaw!" I dropped her and she scrabbled away.

"I apologize. I think she has rabies." I mutter.

Whitestorm was calmly watching the whole time. His tail flicked side to side and he held an uncertain look.

"Do you like him?" Tigerclaw's eyes were glowing a strange green color and his ear twitched, as if waiting for a response.

"No," I mumbled and licked my chest fur embarrassingly.

When I looked at Tigerclaw again, the green faded and he looked sort of disappointed. Whitstorm's ear flicked and I knew I was dismissed. I flashed one last glance at Tigerclaw, who had his ears flattened and he was looking at me with sadness. Why did he seem so disappointed?

Flashback

Blazepaw's POV:

I opened my eyes slowly. Above me, Tigerclaw was caressing my cheek in his warm hand.

"Goodmorning." He murmured.

"Goodmorning," I whisper.

It was like the whole world around me stopped. He seemed so happy yet sad at the same time. If only I could stay like this forever.

End of flashback

I shook my head, turned, and headed back to Firepaw. Lilypaw didn't look too pleased either. I trotted up to them and sat down.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Ravenpaw answered quickly. "Tigerclaw sent me hunting ShadowClan territory but I'm fine. Just drop it."

I sat down and we ate in deathly silence. Nobody dared to speak. Ravenpaw changed back into his human form and stepped inside the cabin. Ravenpaw was already asleep when we came in.

By the way he was making the squeaks and yelps, I knew he was having a nightmare. I flung out of his bed and his eyes were wide open. I rushed over to his bed and started whispering soft words and rubbing his back. It didn't stop him from shaking. Lilypaw went to his other side made him focus on her. He calmed down but not for long.

"Ravenpaw," said Firepaw seriously. "There's something you need to know. Something we heard last night when we were out looking for the wild garlic." Ravenpaw looked away, still trembling from his dream, but Firepaw persisted. "Ravenpaw, we heard Tigerclaw telling Darkstripe and Longtail that you betrayed ThunderClan. He told them you slipped away during the trip to Mothermouth and told ShadowClan that the camp was unguarded."

Ravenpaw spun round to face Firepaw. "But I didn't!" he exclaimed, horrified.

"We know you didn't," Lilypaw said softly.

"But Darkstripe and Longtail believe you did, and Tigerclaw

persuaded them that they should get rid of you." I say.

I felt the anger run deep through my veins. Why did Tigerclaw want to get rid of his own apprentice?

Ravenpaw was speechless, his breath coming in gasps.

"Why would Tigerclaw want to get rid of you, Ravenpaw?" Firepaw asked gently. "He's one of the Clan's strongest warriors. What threat are you to him?"

Ravenpaw crawled over to Firepaw and whispered hoarsely in our ears. "Because the RiverClan deputy didn't kill Redtail; Tigerclaw did."

As soon as he said those words I stood abruptly and left. What has gotten into me? I storm angrily out of camp. I didn't care if I made a scene. I didn't even know why I was angry. That night I sat down beside a tree and looked up at the stars. If only Mom had been here. She would make all the pains go away. I covered my mouth and choked on a sob. Silent tears streamed down my face and my cries got louder. I ended up staying the whole night out in the forest and crying. I got a little bit of sleep but not much due to the hard ground.

"Blazepaw!" it was Tigerclaw's voice. He was yelling for me.

"Blazepaw!" it got louder and I opened my eyes.

Right above me was Tigerclaw looking at me with wild eyes. "What?"

"'What?' That's all your gonna say?!?" he yelled.

"What else do you want me to say?" I asked.

Last night was blurry. I remembered everything until Ravenpaw said Tigerclaw killed Redtail. I shivered from the cold and the thought of Tigerclaw killing someone. I mean, sure, he was scary and all but I never thought he could kill. Kill in cold blood. Tigerclaw must've sensed my shivers because he took off his bulky

jacket and gave it to me.

"You must be freezing. Great StarClan you could've been eaten alive by a bear or taken by rouges or-" Tigerclaw kept fretting.

"Tigerclaw! I'm alive and breathing in front of you! I don't see the point in fretting when you see me breathing and talking! I'm fine!" Tigerclaw's hand flew up to my forehead.

"You have a cold." He mutters darkly.

"No I do n-" My sentence was cut off by a sneeze.

I looked up at Tigerclaw and sniffled. His face was so close to mine I could feel his breath fan my face.

"Well sitting here isn't going to help it! What am I going to do with you?!?" Tigerclaw asked and reached for my waist.

I started to panic. It was just like the gathering. I fought the urge to completely freeze and pushed his hand away. I uncomfortably looked away. He lifted my chin with his hand.

"You thought I was going to hurt you?" he asks.

Instead of answering I looked away and got up. "We should go,"

He grips my shoulder and pushes back on the ground. His hand was pressed firmly on my chest and it made me more uncomfortable by the minute.

"Please answer my question," Tigerclaw sounded intrigued. And worried.

"Yes," My voice was nothing more than an audible whisper.

I squirmed under his heated gaze. Tigerclaw sighed. He almost sounded miserable. "I didn't want to tell you but you have some kind of phobia of being abused or attacked."

He continued. "When in the midst of battle how would you react to a man trying to attack you?"

"I wouldn't. My consciousness tells me when to react and when not to." I answer.

Tigerclaw frowns but says nothing. We got up and I stretched. Tigerclaw turned to me and grabbed my hands.

"I would *never* hurt or lie to you, Blazepaw." he sounded serious, but deep down inside of me I knew one day that promise would be broken.

We walked back to the camp in silence. As soon as I got into the camp almost everybody swarmed me with questions and worries. Tigerclaw's glowed yellow again and he bared his sharp teeth at everybody. He let out a growl.

Firepaw and Graypaw ignored his threats to stay back and crushed me in a hug. I knew what they were about to ask but I told them I would explain later.

"Oh! We forgot to tell you, Brindleface had her kids! You should go see them!" Firepaw grinned.

He knew I loved kids and babies. Sure, they were a lot of work, but I bet being a mother is everything.

Whitestorm was guarding the nursery and there was a proud look on his face. "Here to see the kids?"

"You know it!" I reply with a grin.

"Be quiet though. Brindleface is very tired." he warned but still had a proud look on his face.

I pushed my way through the door and went into Brindleface's room. Inside, she was holding three bundles of blankets. She looked up at me and smiled.

"How are you feeling?" I whisper and sat in the chair beside her bed.

"Tired," she replied. She gazed down at the bundles with so much passion, care, undying love, and pride. "But all the kids are healthy

and strong,"

"That's good," I smiled.

"Here, you can hold her," Brindleface took one bundle and carefully put it in my open arms.

The baby let out a small cry when she was dropped into my arms but I hushed her and rocked her until her cries silenced.

Brindleface looked at me with a small smile. "You would make a good mother, you know,"

"Everybody says that," I murmur.

"You and Tigerclaw would make good, strong warriors," There was a hint of teasing in her voice.

That made me look up. "Nothing is going on between Tigerclaw and I," I needed to sound distant, or else Brindleface would suspect something.

I'll never admit it to Tigerclaw but... I love him. I love him a lot. Ever since I met him... It was like.... We were meant to be together.

I couldn't possibly love anyone else if I tried. And I tried. I tried to get him out of my head but I couldn't because I love him.

"I wasn't saying you liked him, I was saying you two would have good warriors," she murmured.

Although she'd dropped the conversation, I knew she would keep pestering me about it. I handed the baby back to her and exchanged a small goodbye. Outside, Firepaw was waiting for me. I think.

"Bluestar wants to see us," he says in his cat form.

I changed into mine and we walked to her cabin. Longtail and Darkstripe were on guard outside, looking discreet and alert.

As soon as Longtail saw me coming, he growled. I rolled my eyes. "Come inside," Bluestar meowed, turning to lead the way. Firepaw

and I trotted after her. Longtail immediately stood up as if to follow us.

Bluestar looked back at him over her shoulder. "I think I'll be safe enough with young Firepaw and Blazepaw," she meowed. Longtail looked uncertain for a moment, then sat down again outside the entrance.

We padded in and Bluestar sat down on the wooden floor. "Brindleface's kits are lovely," I purred.

Bluestar looked serious. "Lovely they may be, but they mean more mouths to feed, and the season of leaf-bare will soon be here." Then she glanced at Firepaw and me, who was unable to hide our surprise at her melancholy tone. "Oh, don't listen to me," meowed Bluestar, shaking her head impatiently. "The first cold wind always worries me. Come; make yourself comfortable."

We dropped onto our bellies and I tucked my paws under myself. I curled my tail around my body and the tip flicked once in a while.

"I'm still aching from our training session yesterday," she admitted when she had finally settled herself and curled her tail around her paws. "You fought well, young ones."

We accepted her praise gratefully. Firepaw lifted his head, as if ready to speak. He couldn't tell her about Tigerclaw.

But it was Bluestar who spoke first, staring past him at the far wall of her den. "I can still smell the stale stench of ShadowClan in the camp," she murmured. "I hoped never to see the day when our enemy broke into the heart of ThunderClan." Firepaw and I nodded in silent agreement, sensing Bluestar was going to say more.

"And so many deaths." She sighed. "First Redtail, then Lionheart. I thank StarClan at least the warriors we have left are strong and loyal like them. At least with Tigerclaw as deputy, ThunderClan may still be able to defend itself."

Bluestar went on. "There was a time, when Tigerclaw was a young warrior, that I feared for the strength of his passion. Such energy

can need careful channeling. But now I am proud to see how much respect the Clan has for him. I know he is ambitious, but his ambition makes him one of the bravest cats I have ever had the honor to fight alongside."

I nod in agreement. Firepaw looked at me in shock. He wouldn't change how I feel about Tigerclaw. Not now, not ever.

Her next words were quiet and full of concern. "You know Brokenstar will return. He made it clear at the Gathering that he wants hunting rights in all the territories."

"We fought him off once," Firepaw said.

"And we could do it again," I finish for him.

"That's true," Bluestar acknowledged with a wry nod. "StarClan will honor your courage, young Firepaw, and Blazepaw." She paused and licked a healing wound on her side. "I think you ought to know that, in the battle with the rats, it was not my fifth life that I lost, but my seventh."

I gasp and Firepaw sat up straight. I bristled from head to tail and stood up as well.

Bluestar went on. "I have let the Clan believe it was my fifth because I don't want them to fear for my safety. But two more lives, and I will have to leave you to join StarClan."

"But you can't!" I burst out. "What about Whitestorm and Lilypaw and.....me?"

I grew quiet again. My tail dropped and I flattened my ears. Bluestar touched her nose to my ear. "When the time comes, you will join me as well. But you are young. StarClan wouldn't possibly take you now."

Bluestar nodded. "I am tired now," she rasped. "Off you go. And Firepaw, Blazepaw, I don't expect you to repeat this conversation to anyone."

"Thank you for sharing this with us," Firepaw purred respectfully.

We walked out of the den and suddenly Frostfur and Mousefur burst out of the nursery yelling, "Our kits have been taken!" Over and over again.

Tigerclaw bounded over to her. He called to the Clan, "Quick, search the camp! Whitestorm, stay where you are. Warriors, patrol the camp boundary. Apprentices, search every den!"

Firepaw and I rushed to the warrior's den and looked under every bed, couch, or table. I searched Tigerclaw's room. I came across an open notebook that said

Queen Of My Heart

I didn't have time to read it. I lifted my nose and let the scents wash my mouth. No sign of Lilackit or the others.

Dustpaw and Sandpaw were searching the elders' den. I left them to it and charged from one clump of grass to another, pushing my muzzle into them, ignoring the nettles that stung my nose. There was no sign of the kits anywhere. I looked around the camp boundary. Warrior spaced backward and forward, urgently sniffing the air.

I saw Yellowfang push her way through the entrance in the back of the nursery and could smell the bitter tang of her fear scent.

Tigerclaw's yowl sounded from the bushes behind the nursery. All the cats raced over to him, headed by Frostfur. They crowded as closely as they could, jostling to see through the dense undergrowth. Firepaw and I nosed our way forward and saw Tigerclaw standing over a motionless bundle of dappled fur.

I let out a wail and it started to rain. Even though Firepaw's pelt was soaked, I could see him bristling. Bluestar stepped through the crowd and leaned over the medicine cat.

"She has been killed by a warrior blow," she meowed softly.

A yowl came from the back of the crowd.

"Yellowfang is gone!"

Farewell Ravenpaw

[image] [image]

Chapter 13
Goodbyes are only for those who love with their eyes. Those who love with the soul and heart know there is no such thing as separation.

[image]

♛♛♛

"Yellowfang has killed Spottedleaf and taken my kits!" screeched Frostfur. The other queens rushed to Frostfur's side and tried to calm her with licks and caresses, but Frostfur pushed them away and wailed her grief to the darkening sky. As if in reply, the sky rumbled ominously and a cold wind ruffled the cats' fur.

"Yellowfang!" hissed Tigerclaw. "I always knew she was a traitor. Now we know how she managed to fight off the ShadowClan deputy. It was a setup to let her trick her way into our Clan!"

Lightning crackled overhead, punctuating Tigerclaw's words with a glaring white flash, and a clap of thunder rolled around the woods.

Could Yellowfang really have killed Spottedleaf? My vision blurred and my legs felt wobbly. The rain pounding on my ears was not helping. I felt fur beside me and I looked up. Tigerclaw was beside me grooming between my ears and on my cheeks.

I pressed close to him, wishing for more warmth. My wish was granted. The heat was rolling off him in waves. He must be burning from all the shouting and anger.

Above the shocked murmurings, Darkstripe meowed loudly, "Bluestar! What do you say?"

The cats fell silent as they turned to look at their leader. Bluestar's

gaze moved across the crowd of cats, and settled finally on Spottedleaf's body. The first drops of rain began to fall, sparkling like dewdrops on the medicine cat's still-glossy fur. Bluestar blinked slowly. Grief clouded her face, and for a moment I was afraid that this new death would overwhelm her. But when her eyes opened they glittered with a fierceness that showed her determination to seek revenge for this cruel attack. She lifted her head.

"If Yellowfang has killed Spottedleaf and stolen Frostfur's kits, she will be hunted down without mercy." The crowd meowed approvingly.

"But we must wait," Bluestar went on. "There is a storm coming, and I am not prepared to risk more lives. If ShadowClan has our kits, they will come to no immediate harm. I suspect Brokenstar wants them as recruits for his own Clan, or as hostages-to force us to let him hunt in our territory. As soon as the storm has passed, a patrol will follow Yellowfang and bring back our kits."

"We cannot waste time, or the scent will be lost in the rain!" Tigerclaw protested.

"Tigerclaw's right." I butt in. Everybody looked shocked so I explain. "If the scent washes away, we have no trace of Yellowfang or the kits. She could've taken them to ShadowClan and who knows what they will do to the kits. If we go now we still have time to save the kits and see if Yellowfang really killed Spottedleaf."

"Are you saying Yellowfang is innocent?" Darkstripe snarled and soon he was nose to nose with me.

Tigerclaw hissed and batted his ear with an unsheathed paw. I watched with wide eyes as blood started to drip from the nick in his ear. Bluestar was calmly watching. Bluestar looked at her deputy.

"I'd like to discuss our plans with you, please, Tigerclaw." Tigerclaw nodded and stalked away toward Bluestar's den, but the leader hesitated. She glanced at Firepaw and I, signaling with a flick of her tail and a ripple of her whiskers that she wanted to speak to us alone.

The other cats gathered around Spottedleaf and began to share tongues with her, their wails of brief sounding above the thunder. Bluestar wound her way through them and went toward the fern tunnel that led to Spottedleaf's den.

Firepaw and I quietly skirted the mourning cats and followed her inside. It was very dark beneath the ferns. The storm had blotted out the morning sun so that it seemed as if night had fallen. The rain was falling more heavily now, spattering noisily against the leaves, but at least it was sheltered in Spottedleaf's clearing.

"Firepaw, Blazepaw," Bluestar meowed urgently as we arrived at her side, "where is Yellowfang? Do you know?"

Firepaw closed his eyes.

"Firepaw! Blazepaw! You can save the grieving for later."

Firepaw shook himself. "I...I saw Yellowfang go through the camp boundary after the kits went missing. Do you really think she killed Spottedleaf and took the kits?"

Bluestar gazed steadily at him. "I don't know," she admitted. "I want you to find her and bring her back-alive. I need to know the truth."

"You're not sending Tigerclaw?" I couldn't help asking the question.

"Tigerclaw is a great warrior, but in this case, his loyalty to the Clan may cloud his judgment," Bluestar explained. "He wants to give the Clan the vengeance it desires. No cat can blame him for that. The Clan believes Yellowfang has betrayed us, and if Tigerclaw thinks he can reassure the Clan by handing them the dead body of Yellowfang, that's what he will do."

Firepaw and I nodded. She was right-Tigerclaw would kill Yellowfang without question.

Bluestar looked stern for a moment. "If I find that Yellowfang is a traitor, then I will kill her myself. But if she is not..." Her blue eyes burned into Firepaw and I's. "I will not let an innocent cat die."

"But what if Yellowfang won't come back?" Firepaw meowed.

"She will, if you ask her."

I felt stunned by Bluestar's faith in us. The enormity of what she was asking us to do weighed down on us, and we wondered if we had enough courage to carry it through.

"Go at once!" she ordered. "But be careful; you will be on your own and there may be enemy patrols about. This storm will keep our own warriors in camp for a while."

Thunder rolled overhead as Firepaw and I dashed out into the clearing. Rain hammered down, pelting against our fur like tiny stones. A bolt of lightning lit up the faces of Darkstripe and Longtail as they watched us cross the clearing.

Firepaw slowed and went beside Spottedleaf's body. Firepaw buried his nose in Spottedleaf's wet fur and breathed in her scent one last time. "Good-bye, my sweet Spottedleaf," he murmured.

I looked at him in shock. He loved her! He lifted his head to look at me. His green eyes were now dull with exhaustion.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"I am too,"

We stopped talking when we heard the anxious voices of Frostfur and Speckletail.

"Yellowfang must have had help," Speckletail growled.

"Someone from ThunderClan?" came the anxious voice of Frostfur.

"You've heard what Tigerclaw's been saying about Ravenpaw. Perhaps he had something to do with it. I've never felt comfortable with him, myself."

I felt dread build up inside of me.

It's not Tigerclaw's fault- My cat starts but I cut her off.

It's all Tigerclaw's fault! Don't you get it?!? I yell at her.

You love him. There's no denying it, she says and I groan.

I realized we had to act quickly. We would find Yellowfang first, then deal with Ravenpaw. We raced to the spot where we had last seen Yellowfang. We knew her scent so well that we could even smell it through the rain-soaked leaves. We began to push through the bushes, mouth open, to detect where she trailed.

"Firepaw! Blazepaw!" Firepaw jumped and then relaxed as he realized it was Graypaw's voice.

"I've been looking for you!" mewed our friend as he rushed towards us. Firepaw and I gingerly stepped back out of the ferns. Graypaw squinted as rain dripped down his long fur and into his eyes.

"Where are you going?" he mewed.

"To look for Yellowfang," Firepaw replied.

"On your own?" Graypaw's broad gray face showed concern.

"Bluestar asked us to bring Yellowfang back," I mewed.

"What?" Graypaw looked shocked. "Why you?"

"Maybe she thinks we know Yellowfang best, and that we'd find her more easily."

"Wouldn't a party of warriors stand more of a chance?" Graypaw pointed out. "Tigerclaw's the best tracker in the Clan, and if anyone could bring her back, he could."

"Maybe Tigerclaw wouldn't bring her back," Firepaw murmured.

"What do you mean?"

"Tigerclaw's out for revenge. He would just kill her."

"But if she killed Spottedleaf and took the kits..."

"Do you really believe that?" I asked.

Graypaw looked at us, shaking his head in confusion.

"Do you think she's innocent?" he mewed.

"I don't know," Firepaw admitted. "And neither does Bluestar. She wants to find out the truth. That's why she's sending us instead of Tigerclaw."

"But if she ordered Tigerclaw to bring her back alive..." Graypaw's words were drowned by a deafening crack of thunder, and a flash of lightning lit up the trees around them.

In the dazzling light, I glimpsed Frostfur chasing Ravenpaw away from the nursery. The white queen's face was twisted with fury as she hissed at the young black cat and lunged forward to give him a warning nip on the hind leg. Graypaw turned to Firepaw and I.

"What's that all about?" he mewed. Firepaw stared back at his friend, his mind leaping ahead to a new idea. It looked like Ravenpaw's time had run out, and Firepaw needed Graypaw's help. But would his friend believe him? The wind was beginning to roar through the trees above them, and Firepaw had to raise his voice.

"Ravenpaw's in great danger," I meowed.

"What?"

"We have to get him away from ThunderClan. Right now, before anything happens to him."

Graypaw looked puzzled.

"Why? What about Yellowfang?"

"There's no time to explain," Firepaw mewed urgently. "You'll just have to trust us. There must be a way we can get Ravenpaw away. Bluestar's going to keep the warriors in camp till the storm is over, but that doesn't leave us much time."

I tried to picture the hidden corners of the woods, beyond ThunderClan territory.

"We'll have to take him somewhere Tigerclaw won't find him, somewhere he can survive without the Clan." Graypaw stared at me

for a moment.

"What about Barley?"

"Barley!" Firepaw and I echoed.

"You mean, take Ravenpaw to the Twolegplace?" His ears twitched with excitement.

"Yes, that might be the best idea."

"Come on, then!" meowed Graypaw. "What are we waiting for?"

We touched Graypaw's fur with our noses. "Come on, then."

Dustpaw and Sandpaw were huddled close to each other as we got in the den. Ravenpaw was sitting far off, looking distraught. Lilypaw had her head buried in his shoulder and he had an arm draped across her shoulder.

"Ravenpaw," Firepaw hissed through the entrance. Ravenpaw and Lilypaw looked up. Firepaw flicked his ears and the black cat followed him out into the storm.

"Come on," I whispered. "We're taking you to Barley."

"Barley?" Ravenpaw mewed in bewilderment, narrowing his eyes against the driving rain.

"Why?" Lilypaw's eyes were wide.

"Because you'll be safe there," Firepaw answered, looking the black cat straight in the eye.

"Did you see what Frostfur did?" mewed Ravenpaw, his voice quavering. "I was only going to check on the kits...."

"Come on," I interrupted him. "We must hurry!"

Ravenpaw met his friend's gaze.

"Thanks, you guys," he murmured.

Then he turned into the wind and bounded across the clearing. The five of us rushed toward the camp entrance, our fur flattened by the howling wind. As we entered the gorse tunnel, a voice called them back.

"You five! Where are you going?"

It was Tigerclaw. Anger boiled my veins. I spun around and bared my teeth in a snarl. "It's none of your business! Like you care anyway!"

Tigerclaw took a step back in surprise. Bluestar strode up to us with approval written on her face.

"Well done, Firepaw, Blazepaw," she meowed. "I see you've persuaded your three friends to go with you. ThunderClan has brave apprentices, Tigerclaw, if they are willing to run an errand in weather like this."

"Surely this is not a time for errands?" objected Tigerclaw.

"One of Brindleface's kits has a cough." Bluestar's voice was icily calm. "Firepaw and Blazepaw have offered to fetch some coltsfoot for her."

"Does she really need her friends to go too?" asked Tigerclaw.

"In this storm, I think they're lucky to have the company!" answered Bluestar. She looked deep into Firepaw and I's eyes, and we were suddenly aware of the trust she was placing in us.

"Off you go, you five," she meowed. Firepaw and I returned her gaze gratefully.

"Thank you," Firepaw purred, dipping his head.

With a swift glance at his companions, he led the way along the familiar paths toward Fourtrees. The wind roared through the branches above them and the trees swayed, their trunks creaking and cracking as though they might fall at any moment. The rain poured down through the leaves, soaking us to our hides.

We reached the stream, but the stepping-stones we usually leaped across had completely disappeared. We stopped on the bank and looked down in dismay at the wide, brown, swirling river.

"This way," Firepaw meowed. "There's a fallen tree up here. We can use it to cross."

He led us upstream to a log that rested only a kitten step above the rushing water.

"Be careful, it'll be slippery!" I warned, leaping carefully up onto it. The log's bark had been stripped away, leaving only smooth, wet wood to balance on. Carefully the five of us walked along the trunk.

The trees were bigger on the other side, offering some shelter from the storm as they hurried on, side by side.

"Are you going to tell me exactly why we need to get Ravenpaw away?" panted Graypaw.

"Because he knows that Tigerclaw killed Redtail," Firepaw answered.

"Tigerclaw killed Redtail!" Graypaw echoed in disbelief, stopping dead and staring first at Firepaw and then at Ravenpaw.

"At the battle with RiverClan," puffed Ravenpaw. "I saw him."

"But why would he do that?" Graypaw protested, setting off again.

We walked up the slope and I answered this time. "Because he wanted to be deputy and when Bluestar dies, he can become the leader. He's bloodthirsty and he's trying to make it seem that Ravenpaw is the one behind it...."

"But really... it was him the whole time," Lilypaw whispered.

"Exactly," I respond with a small nod.

We sat down again and I flattened my ears. "He wants to kill Ravenpaw. I overheard him talking to Darkstripe and Longtail. They believed him."

Ravenpaw had halted farther down the slope, his sides heaving as he caught his breath. He looked smaller than ever with his sodden fur clinging to his scrawny body.

"You saw the way Frostfur went for Ravenpaw today?" Firepaw meowed to Graypaw. "Tigerclaw's been hinting to everyone that Ravenpaw is a traitor. But he'll be safe with Barley. Now come on; we must hurry!"

It was impossible to talk in the open expanse of WindClan territory. The wind howled around us while the thunder and lightning rolled and flashed overhead. The four of us lowered our heads and pushed onward into the heart of the storm.

"We can't take you any farther, Ravenpaw," meowed Firepaw through the gale. "We have to get back and find Yellowfang before the storm has passed."

Ravenpaw looked up through the battering rain, alarmed. Then he nodded. We changed into our human forms.

"Will you be able to find Barley alone?" yowled Firepaw.

"Yes, I remember the way," answered Ravenpaw.

"Watch out for those dogs," warned Graypaw. Ravenpaw nodded.

"I will!" Suddenly he frowned,

"How can you be sure Barley will welcome me?"

"Just tell him you caught an adder once!" answered Graypaw, affectionately nudging his friend's rain-soaked shoulder.

Lilypaw looked at Ravenpaw with tears in her eyes.

"If I never see you again, just don't forget me." she cried.

"I would never," he responded.

Suddenly, she bounded up to him and kissed him. He wrapped his arms around her waist and she wrapped hers around his neck. As

soon as they pulled away, Lilypaw let out a small sob. Ravenpaw kissed her one more time and turned to us.

"Go," Firepaw urged, aware that time was short.

"And don't worry; I'll make sure everyone knows you didn't betray ThunderClan."

"What if Tigerclaw comes looking for me?" Ravenpaw's voice was small against the rumbling storm. Firepaw met his gaze steadily.

"He won't. I shall tell him you are dead."

Oml I can't believe book one is almost over! I'm literally crying! I hope you all really enjoyed it so far! Please comment and vote! Love you all!

The rescue

Chapter 14
A warrior with a cause is the most dangerous soldier of all

[image]

♛♛♛

Firepaw, Graypaw, Lilypaw, and I retraced our steps back into ThunderClan territory. All of us were bone-weary and wet but we kept the pace. The storm was beginning to move away. A ThunderClan patrol would be out soon and on Yellowfang's trail. We had to find her first.

Even though the black thunderclouds were beginning to roll away toward the horizon, the sky was still dark. I guessed it must be sunset.

"Why don't we head straight into ShadowClan territory?" suggested Graypaw as we ran down the steep hillside into Fourtrees.

"We need to pick up Yellowfang's scent first," Firepaw explained.

"I just hope it won't lead to the ShadowClan camp." and I finished.

Graypaw glanced sideways at us, but didn't reply. We headed back over the stream, into ThunderClan territory. There was no scent of Yellowfang until we crossed into the oak woods close to the camp. Now that the rain had finally stopped, the scents around us were beginning to return. I hoped that the rain had not washed away Yellowfang's trail completely. I stopped and brushed at a fern with the tip of my nose, and recognized the familiar smell. Yellowfang's fear-scent prickled in my nostrils.

"She came this way!" I meowed.

We pushed our way through the wet undergrowth. The rain was easing, and the thunder was fading into the distance. Time was running out. Firepaw and I pushed on faster.

To our dismay, I realized Yellowfang's scent was indeed leading us straight to ShadowClan territory. My heart sank. Did this mean Tigerclaw's accusations were true? I wouldn't let him be right. For once I don't love Tigerclaw. I began to hope that each new smell would take us in a different direction, but the trail was unfaltering.

They arrived at the Thunderpath and halted. Several cars roared by, throwing up fountains of dirty water. We hung back from the edge of the wide, gray track until there was a gap. Then we raced across the path and into ShadowClan territory.

The scent markers that lined the border made my paws tingle. Graypaw halted and looked around nervously.

"I always thought I'd have a few more warriors with me when I finally entered ShadowClan territory," he confessed.

"Not afraid, are you?" Firepaw murmured.

"Aren't you? My mother warned me about the stench of ShadowClan many times."

"And my mother taught me no such things," Firepaw spat scornfully.

We trailed on. Yellowfang's scent-trail led us steadily into the heart of ShadowClan's hunting grounds. The woods here were gloomy, the undergrowth crowded with nettles and brambles.

"I can't smell her," complained Graypaw.

"It's too wet."

"It's there," Lilypaw assured him.

"I can smell that though," Graypaw spat suddenly.

"What?" I hissed. He stopped, alarmed.

"Kitscent. There's kit blood here!"

I started searching for Lilackit. Lilypaw as well. I knew her and Lilackit had talked but I never knew they were so close. A snap caught my attention and I lifted my head. With a screech, Yellowfang flew at me with her claw unsheathed. I hissed and kicked her off. All of us circled her with bared teeth.

"I knew ThunderClan would blame me!" she hissed, her eyes flashing with all her old hostility.

"Where are the kits?" Lilypaw demanded.

"We can smell their blood!" spat Graypaw.

"Have you harmed them?" I ask.

"I don't have them," snarled Yellowfang angrily. "I've come to find them and take them back. I stopped because I smelled blood too. But they're not here."

We looked at each other.

"I don't have them!" Yellowfang repeated.

"Why did you run away, then? Why did you kill Spottedleaf?" Graypaw asked.

"Spottedleaf is...*dead?!?!"* There was no mistaking the shock in her voice.

"You... didn't know?" Firepaw croaked.

"How could I? I left the camp as soon as I heard the kits were missing."

Graypaw and Lilypaw looked suspicious, but Firepaw and I could hear the truth in her voice.

"I know who has taken the kits," she continued. "I smelled his scent near the nursery."

"Who is it?" Firepaw asked.

"Clawface—one of Brokenstar's warriors. And as long as the kits are with ShadowClan, they're in great danger."

"But surely even ShadowClan wouldn't harm kits!" Firepaw protested.

"Don't be so sure," spat Yellowfang. "Brokenstar intends to use them as warriors."

"But they are only three moons old!" Lilypaw gasped.

"That hasn't stopped him before. He has been training kits as young as three moons since he became leader. At five moons he sends them out as warriors!"

"Surely they'd be too small to fight!" Firepaw protested.

Yellowfang hissed scornfully, "Brokenstar doesn't care about that. He has plenty more kits to spare, and if they run out, he can steal them from other Clans!" Her voice was filled with rage. "After all, we're talking about a cat who killed kits from his own Clan!"

Then I wanted to scream. Instead, I made a half choking half coughing sound.

"If he killed ShadowClan's kits, why wasn't he punished?" Firepaw asked at last.

"Because he lied," growled Yellowfang. Bitterness made her voice hard. "He accused me of their murder, and ShadowClan believed him!" I suddenly understood.

"Is that why you were driven out of ShadowClan?" I asked.

"You have to come back with us and tell all this to Bluestar." Firepaw insisted.

"Not before I have rescued your kits!" Yellowfang spat.

I sniffed the air. The rain had stopped, and the wind was dying

down. The ThunderClan patrol would be well on its way. We were not safe here.

Graypaw still seemed shocked by Yellowfang's accusation. "How could a leader kill kits from his own clan?" he demanded.

"Brokenstar insisted on training them too hard and too young. He took two of the kits away for battle practice." Yellowfang took a deep, wheezing breath. "They were only four moons old. They were already dead when he brought them back to me. They bore the scratches and bites of a full warrior, not of apprentices. He must have fought them himself. There was nothing I could do. When their mother came to see them, Brokenstar was with me. He said that he had found me standing over their dead bodies." Her voice cracked and she looked away.

"Why didn't you tell her it was Brokenstar?" Firepaw asked in disbelief.

Yellowfang shook her head. "I couldn't."

"Why not?" I cry.

The old she-cat hesitated. When she spoke, her voice was heavy with regret. "Brokenstar is ShadowClan's leader. Noble Raggedstar was his father. His word is law."

Then Firepaw meowed, "We'll rescue the kits together. Tonight. But we can't stay here. I can smell the ThunderClan patrol coming." He paused. "If Tigerclaw is with them, Yellowfang doesn't stand a chance. He'll kill her before we can explain."

Yellowfang looked at him, alert and determined again. "There's peat this way; it'll be wet after the rain," she told him. "Our scents will be disguised there."

She leaped into the undergrowth and we followed. They could hear the rustling of undergrowth in the distance now. It was no longer the wind that disturbed the bushes, but an approaching patrol, no doubt hungry for revenge and fired up by Tigerclaw's lies.

An eerie stillness settled over the woods, and a thin fog was

beginning to gather between the tree trunks.

Yellowfang led us onward. The ground grew soggier, and our paws began to sink into the soft peat. The musty smell choked my nostrils, but at least it would mask our own trail. Behind us, the noise of cats grew louder.

"Quick, under here," Yellowfang urged, ducking under a broad-leaved bush. We crawled under. I kept as still as I could, trying to ignore the rank wetness of the ground seeping into my belly fur, and listening to the rustling of the ThunderClan patrol as it came nearer and nearer.

The plan

Chapter 15
Quitting is not an option. Fight on.

[image]

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I could tell there were several cats in the patrol, traveling fast. I couldn't recognize the cats' individual scents through the earthy bog odors, but I knew it was ThunderClan. I held my breath as the paw steps raced past and away.

"Are we really going to try to rescue the kits from ShadowClan alone?" whispered Graypaw. Yellowfang answered him first.

"I might be able to find us some help from inside ShadowClan. Not all the cats support Brokenstar."

That caught my interest. I pricked my ears to listen.

"When he became leader," Yellowfang explained, "Brokenstar forced the elders to leave the security of the inner camp. They had to live on the boundary and hunt for themselves. These are cats who have grown up with the warrior code. Some of them might help us."

"Good," I reply with a strong voice, "We need all the help we can get."

Yellowfang looked proud of my determinedness.

"And I might be able to persuade the ThunderClanhunting party to help us too," Firepaw meowed. "If I can speak to them before they see Yellowfang, I might be able to make them believe her story.

Graypaw, you wait at the dead ash, where we smelled the kit blood, till one of us returns."

Graypaw looked worried. "But do you really trust Yellowfang to bring back help?" he murmured.

Firepaw opened his jaws to reply but my angry response was all he heard. "She's already proven herself; she doesn't need to do it again."

Graypaw looked surprised but didn't object.

Firepaw and I sprinted to the patrol. They didn't bother not hiding their scent. I could tell they were angry. They had every right to be but not at Yellowfang. Overhead, the thick layer of cloud had finally rolled away. Beyond the treetops, Silverpelt glittered across the night sky. The moon was just rising, but its cold light couldn't pierce the mist that clung to the shadowy undergrowth.

Somehow I had managed to memorize Tigerclaw's scent. I lifted my nose and inhaled the ThnderClan cats' scents. No Tigerclaw. Good. It needs to stay that way. We caught up to them and halted dright behind them.

They spun around with bared teeth and bristling fur. Darkstripe was with them and the young she-cat Mousefur, as well as the tabby warrior Runningwind. Mousefur wasn't the only she-cat in the patrol—Willowpelt was there too. I could understand why Mousefur would want to be here. I only talked with her once but she told me she had a rough time with kits. She said Longtail tried desperately but it was to no avail.

She said Lilackit was her miracle baby.

"Firepaw! Blazepaw!" growled Whitestorm. "What are you doing here?" Firepaw gasped for breath.

"Bluestar sent us!" he panted.

"She wanted us to find Yellowfangbefore—" I say.

Whitestorm interrupted him. "Ah!" he meowed. "Bluestar told me I

might find friends out here. Now I understand what she meant." He looked thoughtfully at us.

"Is Tigerclaw nearby?" Firepaw asked. Whitestorm looked at us curiously. "Bluestar insisted she needed him to remain at camp, to protect the remaining kits."

I relaxed just a bit. "Whitestorm, we need your help. We can lead you to the kits. Graypaw and Lilypaw are waiting for us. We plan to rescue them tonight. Will you come?"

"Of course we"ll come!" The warriors flicked their tails with excitement.

"It will mean raiding the ShadowClan camp," Firepaw warned.

"Can you lead us there?" asked Runningwind eagerly.

"No, but Yellowfang can. And she has promised to bring help from her old allies in the camp."

Mousefur glared at me and thrashed her tail angrily. "You have found Yellowfang?" she hissed.

"I don't understand," meowed Whitestorm, puzzled. "The traitor is going to help rescue the kits she stole?" I took a deep breath to calm myself, then looked steadily into Whitestorm's eyes.

"Yellowfangdidn't take them," I meowed. "Nor did she murder Spottedleaf. She wants to help us rescue our kits."

Whitestorm stared back at us, then blinked slowly. "Lead the way, Firepaw, Blazepaw," he ordered.

Graypaw was waiting by the ash tree, pacing restlessly around its rotten trunk. He stopped as soon as he saw the patrol emerge from the mist and twitched his whiskers in greeting.

"Any sign of Yellowfang?" Firepaw asked.

"Not yet," answered Graypaw.

"We don't know how far it is to the ShadowClan camp," I pointed out quickly, feelingWhitestorm stiffen beside me.

"She may be on her way back right now."

"Or she might be happily sharing tongues with her ShadowClan comrades while we sit here like fools waiting to be ambushed!" meowed Lilypaw. Whitestorm watched us. His ears flicked uneasily.

"Firepaw? Blazepaw?" he prompted.

"She will come back," We promised.

"Well said, young Firepaw." Yellowfang stalked out from behind the ash tree and sat down. "You're not the only ones who can sneak up on someone," she meowed at us.

"Remember the day we met? You were looking in the wrong direction that time too." Three other ShadowClan cats appeared from behind the tree and settled themselves calmly on either side of Yellowfang. The ThunderClan cats bristled, alert and suspicious. Both Clans stared silently at each other. I fidgeted uncomfortably, unsure what to do now.

Eventually one of the ShadowClan cats, a gray tom, spoke. His long body was skinny, and his fur looked dull. "We have come to help you, not to harm you. You have come for your kits; we will help you rescue them."

"What's in it for you?" asked Whitestorm warily.

"We want your help to get rid of Brokenstar. He has broken the warrior code, and ShadowClan is suffering."

"So it's that simple, is it?" growled Runningwind. "We just drop into your camp, snatch the kits, kill your leader, and go home."

"You will not meet as much resistance as you think," murmured the gray tom. Yellowfang stood up.

"Let me introduce my old friends," she meowed, weaving her way

around the ShadowClan cats. She brushed past the gray tom. "This is Ashfur; he is one of the Clan elders.

"And this is Nightpelt, a senior warrior before Raggedstar was killed." She circled a battered black tom, who nodded at them.

"And this is one of our elder queens, Dawncloud. Two of her kits died driving out WindClan." Dawncloud, a small tabby, meowed in greeting.

"I do not wish to lose any more of my kits," she told us. Whitestorm gave his chest a quick lick to smooth down his fur.

"You are clearly skilled warriors if you managed to creep up on us like that. But are there enough of you? We need to know what we'll face when we raid the ShadowClan camp."

"The old and sick of ShadowClan are slowly starving," meowed Ashfur. "The casualties among our kits are more than we can cope with."

"But if ShadowClan is a mess," burst out Darkstripe, "how come you have shown so much strength lately? And why is Brokenstar still your leader?"

"Brokenstar is surrounded by a small group of elite warriors," answered Ashfur. "They are the ones to fear, because they would die for him without question. The other warriors obey his orders only because they are frightened. They will fight by his side as long as they think Brokenstar is going to win. If they thought he would lose..."

"They would fight against him, not for him!" Darkstripe finished the elder's words in disgust.

"What sort of loyalty is that?" The hackles of the ShadowClan cats began to rise.

"Our Clan was not always like this," Yellowfang interrupted. "When Raggedstar led ShadowClan, we were feared for our strength. But in those days our strength came from the warrior code and Clan loyalty, not from fear and bloodlust." The old medicine cat sighed.

"If only Raggedstar had lived longer."

"How did Raggedstar die?" asked Whitestorm curiously. "There were so many rumors at the Gatherings, but no one seemed to know for sure."

Yellowfang's eyes clouded with sorrow. "He was ambushed by a warrior patrol from another Clan."

Whitestorm nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, that is what most cats seemed to think. These are bad timesindeed, when leaders are picked off in the dark, instead of open and honorable battle."

I frowned, my mind racing over different battle plans.

"Is there any way of taking the kitswithout alerting the whole Clan?" I asked.

Dawncloud answered me. "They are very closely guarded. Brokenstar will be expecting ThunderClanto try to take them. You won't be able to steal them in secret. Open attack is your only hope."

"Then we must concentrate our attack on Brokenstar and his inner guard," meowed Whitestorm.

Yellowfang had a suggestion. "The ShadowClan warriors should lead me into the ShadowClan camp.They could say they had captured me. We have to make sure Brokenstar and his warriors are out of theirdens. News of my capture will bring them into the clearing. Once they're all out in the open, I'll give thesignal for you to attack."

Whitestorm was silent for a moment. Then he nodded, his face grave as he committed his warriors to theattack. "Very well, Yellowfang," he meowed. "Please lead the way to the ShadowClan camp."

!!PLEASE READ!!

I won't be on Wattpad much after I published this chapter. A very close family member died just this morning and I'm still

grieving. My parents said that tomorrow and Monday I still need to rest. I won't be on Wattpad or any other account until I feel better. Sometimes I'll get on here and write small chapters but it won't be every other day. I've been stressed with school and other activities, so if you don't see me much lately that's why. Thank you all so much for reading Fire in my heart and my other books and I hope to write soon!

The end is the beginning

[image]

Chapter 16
"**What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.**"-**T.S Eliot**

[image]

♛♛♛

Some say you have the same amount of hours each day and every day. That wasn't the case. My time was running out fast and I have to make a choice sooner or later. Saving Lilackit and the others were the only things my mind was set on.

Yellowfang turned and pushed her way into the bracken. Whitestorm and the others followed her. Yellowfang guided them to a small hollow surrounded by thick undergrowth and pointed out the entrance to the ShadowClan camp. The tangled mass of brambles looked very different from the neat gorse tunnel that led into the ThunderClan camp.

The camp boundary was full of holes and gaps and the stench of rotting meat wafted toward them.

"You eat crow food?" whispered Graypaw, curling his lip.

"Our warriors are used for attacking, not hunting," replied Ashfur. "We eat whatever we can find."

"ThunderClan, hide in that clump of bracken over there," hissed Yellowfang. "It's full of toadstools that will disguise your scent. Wait here till you hear me call."

She stepped back to let the other ShadowClan cats lead the way, tucking herself into the center of their group as though she were their prisoner. They headed silently into the camp. The ThunderClan cats settled themselves among the toadstools, tense and alert. I could feel my coat prickling. I looked at Graypaw beside me. The thick fur on the back of our friend's neck was standing on end, and I could hear him panting with suppressed excitement.

Suddenly yowling erupted from the ShadowClan camp. Without hesitating, the ThunderClan cats sprang from their hiding places and raced through the entrance. Yellowfang, Ashfur, Dawncloud, and Nightpelt were in a well-trodden, muddy clearing, wrestling with six vicious-looking warriors. I recognized Brokenstar and his deputy, Blackfoot, among them.

The warriors looked hungry and battle-scarred, but I could see the hard muscles pounding beneath their patchy fur. Around the edge of the clearing, groups of scrawny cats stared uncertainly at the mayhem. Their skinny bodies seemed to recoil at the violence, while their dull eyes looked on, shocked and confused.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Runningnose back away and hide beneath a bush. At Whitestorm's nodded signal, the ThunderClan cats leaped into the battle. I grasped a silver tabby with his claws but was shaken loose.

I tumbled over and the ShadowClan warrior turned on me and gripped me with claws as sharp as blackthorns. I managed to twist and sink my teeth deep into the cat's flesh. The warrior's yowl told him I had found a tender spot, and I bit harder. The warrior screeched again, ripping himself free, and ran off into the bushes.

I stood up. A young ShadowClan apprentice leaped at me from the edge of the camp, its soft kitten fur fluffed up with fear. I sheathed my claws and batted him away easily.

"This is not your battle," I murmur.

"But-" its small squeaky voice made me want to cry.

"Go back to your mother," Blinking back tears, I manage to pick him

up by his scruff and hide him behind a bush.

Whitestorm already had Blackfoot pinned to the ground. He gave him a vicious bite and the injured deputy raced away toward the camp entrance and out into the safety of the forest.

"Blazepaw!" I heard Dawncloud screech my name.

"Watch out! Clawface is—" I didn't hear the rest.

A heavily built brown cat crashed into me. Clawface! I dug his claws into the ground and whirled around to fight. The warrior that killed Spottedleaf! Rage surged through me and I flung myself onto the brown tom. I pushed the warrior to the ground and pressed his head into the dirt. Blinded by fury, I prepared to sink my teeth into Clawface's neck. Clawface was the one that tried to touch me! More furious than ever, I flipped him onto his back and latched onto his throat.

He made awful gurgling sounds and finally, Firepaw knocked me aside to stop me from killing him.

Clawface coughed up blood and raced out of the camp. Brokenstar's warriors had gone. An angry screech sounded from behind Graypaw. Graypaw leaped out of the way and Firepaw saw Yellowfang gripping Brokenstar with muddy, bloodstained paws. His body bled from several wounds. His ears were flattened against his head, and his whiskers were drawn back as he crouched, flattened beneath Yellowfang's powerful grasp.

"I never thought you would be harder to kill than my father!" he snarled up at her.

"You killed Raggedstar?" she wailed.

Brokenstar eyed her coldly. "You found his body. Didn't you recognize my fur between his claws?"

Yellowfang stared in horror as he continued. "He was a soft and foolish leader. He deserved to die."

"No!" hissed Yellowfang, her head dropping. Then she gave herself a

shake. She looked up at Brokenstar, arching her back.

"And Brightflower's kits? Did they deserve to die too?" she rasped. Brokenstar growled and hurled himself at Yellowfang, forcing her onto her belly. Yellowfang didn't even attempt to struggle against his thorn-sharp claws. I saw with alarm that her eyes were glazed with sadness.

"Those kits were weak," Brokenstar hissed, bending his face toward Yellowfang's ear. "They would have been no use to ShadowClan. If I hadn't killed them, some other warrior would have."

A wail came from a queen who I didn't know but he didn't listen.

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," he spat at Yellowfang. "It seems I must have some of my father's softness. I was a fool to let you leave ShadowClan alive!" He lunged, teeth bared, ready to sink them into her neck.

Firepaw and I let out outraged yowls and lunged at him. Firepaw dug his claws into the matted tabby fur and pulled him off the exhausted queen, flinging him to the edge of the clearing. Brokenstar twisted around in midair to land on his feet and looked into our eyes, spitting viciously.

"Don't waste your time, apprentices! I've shared dreams with StarClan. You will have to kill me nine times over before I join them. Do you really think you're strong enough for that?" His eyes glowed with confidence and defiance. Firepaw and I stared back at him. My belly tightened. Brokenstar was a Clan leader! How on earth could I expect to defeat him?

But the watching ShadowClan cats had begun to circle slowly around their defeated leader, snarling and hissing with hatred. They were battered and half-starved, but Brokenstar was outnumbered, and he seemed to realize this with a nervous flick of his tail. He crouched and backed away through the bushes. His eyes glittered menacingly from the shadows, his gaze finding Firepaw and I through the crowd.

"This isn't over," he slunk into the shadows.

"The kits!"Firepaw heard Graypaw's meow from a far corner of the clearing. He rushed over to his friend, Mousefur and Whitestorm bounding at his heels. They could hear the pitiful mewling of kits coming from beneath a pile of leaves and twigs as they approached.

Quickly Graypaw and Mousefur dug down through the foliage until they had uncovered the missing ThunderClan kits at the bottom of a small pit.

"Are they okay?" demanded Whitestorm, his tail twitching with anxiety.

"They're fine," replied Graypaw. "Most have only a few scratches. But that little tabby has a pretty nasty wound on his ear. Can you take a look, Yellowfang?"

The old she-cat was licking her own wounds, but at Graypaw's call, she raced to the side of the pit, where Graypaw had carefully deposited the tabby kit. Firepaw helped Graypaw to lift out the rest of the kits. The last one was gray, like the embers of an old fire.

She mewled and squirmed as Firepaw placed her on the ground. Mousefur let out a cry of joy as she saw her kit huddled against Swiftkit. Yellowfang looked closely at the torn ear.

"We need to stop this bleeding," she meowed. Runningnose stepped out of the shadows. His forepaw was coated in a layer of cobwebs, which he silently passed to Yellowfang. She nodded her thanks and began to treat the kit's wound.

Nightpelt approached the group of ThunderClan cats. "You helped ShadowClan rid itself of a brutal and dangerous leader, and we are grateful. But it is time you left our camp and returned to your own. I promise your hunting grounds will be free of ShadowClan warriors as long as we can find enough food in our own territory."

Whitestorm nodded. "Hunt in peace for one moon, Nightpelt. ThunderClan knows you need time to rebuild your Clan."

He turned to Yellowfang. "And you, Yellowfang?" he asked. "Do you

wish to return with us, or stay here with your old comrades?" Yellowfang looked up at him.

"I will make the journey back with you." She glanced at a deep gash on Whitestorm's hind leg. "You will need a medicine cat, for yourself as well as your kits."

"Thank you," purred Whitestorm. He signaled to the ThunderClan cats with a sweep of his tail and led them out of the clearing. I asked Mousefur if I could carry Lilackit and she agreed. She climbed onto my back and held on by her tiny claws. Yellowfang walked close to the wounded tabby kit, lifting him by the scruff of his neck every time he slipped.

The moon was still rising in the quiet sky as the ThunderClan party began the long trudge home, while around us, showers of brown leaves fluttered to the forest floor.

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I was buoyed up with relief at being home again, Firepaw, Graypaw, and I sprinted ahead of the patrol into the ThunderClan camp. Frostfur was lying in the middle of the clearing, her head resting sadly on her paws. As the three of us bounded in she lifted her nose and sniffed the air.

"My kits!" she cried. She leaped up and raced past us to meet the rest of the party as they emerged from the tunnel.

The kits rushed over to Frostfur and nuzzled into her side. She curled her soft body around them and licked them each in turn, purring loudly.

Yellowfang hung back at the camp entrance and looked on silently.

Bluestar strode up to the returning patrol. She glanced fondly at Frostfur and her kits and then turned her eyes to Whitestorm. "Are they all right?" she asked.

"They're fine," meowed Whitestorm.

"Well done, Whitestorm. ThunderClan honors you." Whitestorm
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bent his head to accept her praise, and added, "But it was thanks to these apprentices that we found them."

Everybody was starting to transform back into their human forms. Firepaw grinned and opened his mouth to speak when Tigerclaw interrupted.

"Blazepaw! Why the hell are you near this traitor?" He bounded up to me and yanked me away. He tucked me into his chest possessively.

"She is no traitor," Firepaw insisted, sounding a bit annoyed. He looked around the camp. The rest of the people had quickly gathered in the clearing to see the kits and congratulate the hunting party. Some of them had spotted Yellowfang and were eyeing her with looks of pure hatred.

"She killed Spottedleaf," spat Longtail.

"Look between Spottedleaf's claws," Graypaw suggested. "You will find the brown fur of Clawface, not Yellowfang's gray fur!"

Bluestar nodded at Mousefur, who darted away from the crowd, toward the spot where Spottedleaf'sbody lay, waiting for its dawn burial. The Clan waited in tense silence till she returned.

"Graypaw is right," Mousefur panted, rushing back to the clearing. "Spottedleaf was not attacked by a gray cat." A murmur of surprise rippled through the crowd.

"But that doesn't mean she didn't help to take the kits!" hissed Tigerclaw.

"Without Yellowfang we never would have recovered the kits!" Firepaw spat. "She knew that a ShadowClan warrior had taken them. She was hunting for them when I found her. She risked her life returning to the ShadowClan camp. It was Yellowfang who thought up the battle plan that got us into the ShadowClan camp and gave us a chance to defeat Brokenstar!"

The cats listened to Firepaw's words, astonished.

"He's right," Whitestorm said. "Yellowfang is a friend."

"I'm glad to hear it," murmured Bluestar, catching Firepaw's eye.

Frostfur's anxious voice sounded from the crowd. "Is Brokenstar dead?" she asked.

"No, he escaped," Whitestorm told her. "But he will never lead ShadowClan again."

Frostfur sighed in relief and returned to nuzzling her kits.

Whitestorm looked at Bluestar. "I promised ShadowClan we would leave them in peace until next full moon," he explained.

"Brokenstar's leadership has left their Clan in chaos." Bluestar nodded.

"That was a wise and generous offer," she said approvingly. The ThunderClan leader walked past Whitestorm and the rest of the patrol and approached Yellowfang. Yellowfang lowered her eyes as Bluestar touched Yellowfang's shoulder.

"Yellowfang, I wish you to replace Spottedleaf as medicine cat to ThunderClan," Bluestar said. "I'm sure you'll find all her supplies as she left them."

The other cats began to murmur to each other, tails flicking with excitement. Yellowfang looked around at them anxiously and said nothing. Frostfur glanced at the other queens before she met Yellowfang's gaze and slowly nodded her approval. Yellowfang bent her head respectfully to the white cat before addressing her new leader.

"Thank you, Bluestar. ShadowClan is not the Clan I once knew. ThunderClan is my Clan now."

I felt a surge of satisfaction that the old woman I had come to love would be my Clan's medicine cat from now on.

"Where's Ravenpaw?" says Bluestar suddenly.

Lilypaw's eyes brimmed with tears and she hugged onto Graypaw. He wrapped his arms around her and rested his head on her shoulder.

"Yes," Tigerclaw chimed in, "where is my apprentice? Strange that he should disappear along with Brokenstar." He looked meaningfully around the Clan.

"If you think he might have been helping Brokenstar," Firepaw said boldly, "then you are wrong!"

Tigerclaw stiffened, a menacing gleam in his yellow eyes.

"Ravenpaw is dead," Firepaw went on, dropping his head. "We found his body in ShadowClan territory. From the scents around him, he must have been slain by a ShadowClan patrol." He looked at Bluestar. "I will tell you everything later," he promised.

"I never said that Ravenpaw was a traitor," hissed Tigerclaw. He paused and allowed an expression of sorrow to cloud his eyes before he turned to address the rest of the Clan. "Ravenpaw might have made a fine warrior. His death has come too soon, and his loss will be felt by many of us for a long time."

I dropped my head. He told me he would never lie to me. That was a lie. His life was full of lies and I didn't know why.

Bluestar broke the silence. "We will miss Ravenpaw, but we shall mourn him tomorrow. First, there is another ritual that must be performed—one, I know, that Ravenpaw would have taken pleasure in." She turned to us. "You have shown great courage tonight. Did they fight well, Whitestorm?" she asked.

"Like warriors," he replied. I went to stand beside Firepaw and Graypaw.

Bluestar met his yellow-eyed gaze and gave a slight nod. Then she lifted her chin and fixed her eyes on Silverpelt's swath of stars. Her voice rang out, clear and measured in the hushed woods. "I, Bluestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices. They have trained hard to

understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn." She looked down at us, narrowing her eyes. "Firepaw, Graypaw, Blazepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do," Gaypaw's voice was shaky.

"I do," Firepaw and I say.

I felt something stir within me, a fire that burned in my belly and rang in my ears. I suddenly felt that everything I had done for the Clan so far—all the prey I had stalked, all the enemy warriors I had fought—had been for the sake of this single moment.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior names: Graypaw, from this moment you will be known as Graystripe. StarClan honors your bravery and your strength, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." She went forward and rested her hand on his shoulder. Graystripe dipped his head.

"Firepaw, from this moment you will be known as Fireheart. StarClan honors your bravery and your strength, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." She exchanged a few words with him before turning to me.

Something changed in her eyes. It was like memories clouded her mind. She thought long and hard. "Blazepaw, from this moment you will be known as Blazefur. StarClan honors your incredible fighting skills and your strength, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Bluestar crushed me in a hug. Our new names were chanted loudly. "Fireheart! Graystripe! Blazefur! Fireheart! Graystripe! Blazefur!"

As they shouted my and Fireheart's names, I could hear the new respect and admiration. "It is almost moonhigh," says Bluestar. "In the tradition of our ancestors, Fireheart, Graystripe, and Blazefur must sit in silent vigil until dawn, and guard the camp alone while we sleep."

We nodded. As the rest of the Clan began to melt away back to their dens, Tigerclaw pushed past Fireheart. The ThunderClan deputy slowed as he passed and hissed quietly into his ear, "Don't think you can outwit me, human. Be careful what you tell Bluestar."

Tigerclaw casually walked up to me. "I need to talk to you..." he glanced at Fireheart's accusing eyes, "alone."

Once we were outside the camp Tigerclaw congratulated me. "It feels good finally being a warrior, huh?"

"Yeah," I said then covered my mouth.

"It's okay, I'm letting you speak." he chuckled. "The reason I wanted to talk to you alone was that I wanted to give you this."

He held a beautiful necklace in his hand.

"I think it was your mother's but I don't know for sure,"

"Thank you," I whisper. He nods. That nagging at my brain started again. I wanted to ask him so many questions but didn't know how. When I first met him, the name sounded so familiar but distant at the same time and now I know why.

Flashback

Julia's POV:

I swung my sword at the tree once again. For the 100th time today. Mom said she wanted me to be practicing more on eye and hand coordination. She tied a shirt to a small tree and told me to aim my sword at it but I couldn't touch the tree. I struggled at first but got used to it.

I grunted as I swung my sword at it again. And again. And again. Kids at my school didn't understand me at all. I was only 11 and I've learned how to beat a 26-year-old woman that has been trained her whole life. AKA, my mother.

I put the sword back in its case and was about to leave until I heard a 'snap'. I whipped my head around and got my sword back out. My bright

blue eyes searched for any threat. Then I saw amber eyes. He climbed out of the bushes.

"кто ты?" (Who are you?) I ask in Russian.

"Я тигровая лапа из Грозового племени ," He answered. (I'm Tigerpaw of ThunderClan)

I was shocked. He knows Russian? The words sounded very complex. Certain Russian can be hard for me sometimes and I was born Russian. What he said was very hard for me to understand but I managed to interpret it.

Tigerpaw. Fierce name.

"Ты говоришь по-английски?" Tigerpaw asked. (Do you speak English?)

"Yes," My accent was thick but I did speak English.

He opened his mouth to speak but my mother was already calling my name. I put the sword away and glanced at him one time.

"Go," He said as I gathered my things.

"When will I see you again?" I ask hurriedly.

"Sometime later on," Was all he responded.

End of flashback

I had always known Tigerclaw. "Remember when we first met?"

"When Lionheart and Whitestorm took you Fireheart to the camp, I knew it was you but I didn't suspect you would remember." Tigerclaw's eyes turned a light green.

I could tell he was excited because he wouldn't stop fidgeting with his hands. "You looked so familiar but distant at the same time. I didn't actually know you were Fawnstep's daughter until you told me what you were trained to do.

"When I first met you, I saw the spark you had. The ferocity and the strength. You surely resemble your mother," I couldn't help but smile. I drew in a breath and suddenly the distance between us had closed.

"Tigercl-" I was stopped when he pressed his lips against mine.

My heart caught on fire as he gripped my hips. It felt like years before we pulled away to breathe. His hand slowly slithered up my body; sending shivers up my spine. Before he could do anymore, I pushed him away.

"I can't. Not right now." I whispered.

Some say you have the same amount of hours each day and every day. That wasn't the case. My time was running out fast and I have to make a choice sooner or later. My love for Tigerclaw was hard to hide and Fireheart's accusations will have to make me choose a side. My loyalty? Or love?

A/N

The first book is done! Onto the second book but first I have to show you something.

[image]

My friend sent me this today! If you look up Blazefur you see this! I'm crying! Thank you so much for the support and love and I'm sorry that I didn't update more lately!

Memes I made cause I'm stupid

[image]

[image]

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[image]

Tigerclaw and Blazefur caught in 4k

[image]

[image]

[image]

Awwww Tigerclaw's protecting his bae

Book 2 - A Warrior at last!

[image]

Chapter 1
You cannot find peace by avoiding life.

[image]

♛♛♛

I shivered as a tiny drop of water fell onto my back. At last, I had my warrior name. I shook out my frost-covered pelt and looked at my breath. Greenleaf was almost over and my winter coat is starting to grow.

In my mind, I replayed yesterday's victory at the ShadowClan camp: Brokenstar's glittering eyes as the ShadowClan leader backed away, hissing threats, before fleeing into the trees after his traitorous companions. The remaining ShadowClan cats had been grateful to ThunderClan for helping them to get rid of their cruel leader, and for the peace, ThunderClan had promised them while they recovered. Brokenstar had not just brought chaos to his own Clan—he had driven the whole of WindClan from their camp, right out of Clan territory.

Then I recalled the attack on ThunderClan. Lionheart's death as well. I refused to believe my mother was dead. She can't be. She just can't. I also refused to believe Tigerclaw was behind Redtail's murder. Surely it was Oakheart, right? Like Tigerclaw explained?

If what Ravenpaw said about Tigerclaw was true, it was best if the

ThunderClan deputy believed his apprentice had died, for he knew a secret Tigerclaw would do anything to conceal. Ravenpaw had told Fireheart and I that the mighty tabby warrior had murdered Redtail, the old ThunderClan deputy, in the hope that he would become the new deputy...which, eventually, he had.

I refused to believe many things but I don't care. Halftail was one of the first cats to wake. I could see the old man moving among the shadows in the elders' den. I glanced toward the warriors' den at the other side of the clearing. Through the branches that sheltered the den, I recognized the broad shoulders of Tigerclaw as he walked into the kitchen.

I turned my head towards Bluestar, who just walked out of her den. She stopped and lifted her head to sniff the air. Then she padded silently out of Highrock's shadow, her long fur glowing blue-gray in the dawn light.

I must warn her about Tigerclaw, I heard Fireheart say in his mind.

You forgot to turn off the connection dipshit! I growled.

Graystripe rolled his eyes. I snorted. Tigerclaw emerged from the warriors' den in his cat form and met Bluestar at the edge of the clearing. He murmured something to her, his tail flicking urgently.

As they passed us, Tigerclaw wrapped his tail around my body and then under my chin, making me lift my head. I tried to stifle the purr that was rising in my throat. Fireheart and Graystripe caught the whole thing.

You're disgusting Blazefur! Graystripe scowled.

I've warned you about him! Fireheart scoffed.

What? I'm not in love with him!

We never asked if you loved him or not, but we already know so you can quit the act, Graystripe said scornfully.

I huffed. "Glad to see the dawn, you three?" Whitestorm's deep meow took us by surprise. I had not noticed the white warrior

approaching.

We nodded. "It's alright. You can speak now."

He chuckled.

"Thank you, Whitestorm," Fireheart meowed gratefully. He stood and stretched his stiff legs one at a time.

I groaned and stretched my legs as well.

Graystripe pushed himself up too. "Brrrrr!" he meowed, shaking the chill from his fur. "I thought the sun would never come up!" A scornful voice mewed from outside the apprentices' den.

"The great warrior speaks!" It was Sandpaw, her pale orange coat fluffed up with hostility. Dustpaw was sitting beside her. With his dark tabby pelt, he looked like Sandpaw's shadow.

He puffed out his chest importantly and mocked, "I'm surprised such heroes even feel the cold!" Sandpaw purred with amusement. Whitestorm shot them a stern look.

"Go and find something to eat; then rest," he ordered us The older warrior turned away and padded toward the apprentices" den. "Come on, you two," he meowed to Sandpaw and Dustpaw. "It's time for your training."

"I hope he has them chasing blue squirrels all day!" Graystripe hissed under his breath.

"But there aren't any blue squirrels." Fireheart mewed in confusion.

"Precisely!" Graystripe's amber eyes gleamed.

"You can't exactly blame them. They did begin their training before us," Fireheart pointed out mildly. "If they'd fought in the battle yesterday, they'd probably have been made warriors too."

"I suppose." Graystripe shrugged.

"Hey, look!" We'd reached the fresh-kill pile.

"One mouse each and a chaffinch to share!" We picked up our meals and looked at each other. Graystripe's eyes suddenly sparkled with delight.

"I suppose we take it to the warriors' side of the camp now," he meowed.

"I suppose we do," I purred, padding after my friends to the patch of nettles where we had often watched Whitestorm, Tigerclaw, and the other warriors share fresh-kill.

Oh, sweet Tigerclaw. After all this time I let my emotions out and so did he and I told him to wait?!? I'm such an idiot! I just wish I could understand him more. I feel like he's hiding so much stuff. And I'm not talking about Redtail's murder.

"Blazefur!" Fireheart yelled in my ear.

"What the hell!" I growled.

"You've been purring and staring across the clearing." Graystripe snorted.

"Not only does she have a crush on Tigerclaw; she kissed him last night!" Fireheart meowed scornfully.

"She didn't!" Graystripe gasped.

"Oh, she did!" He went on. "He confessed his love and so did she and they started making out! It was disgusting!"

"We did not make out and it wasn't disgusting!"

"Yes, it was! You were literally shoving each other's tounges down your throats!"

"No, we were-"

"Why don't we go to bed?" Graystripe awkwardly suggested.

Then I realized that we were fighting in between him.

"Good idea," I seethed through my teeth. We all got up and went into the Warriors den. I was tempted to sleep in Tigerclaw's room because I knew he wouldn't mind but I decided not to. I saw Longtail, Mousefur, and Lilackit on the couch. Mousefur and Lilackit were asleep and Longtail was on his elbows watching them with the happiest smile.

I hit Fireheart and Garystripe's heads, warning them to be quiet. Longtail looked up at us and pointed to three rooms on the left mouthing, *They're empty.* I gave a thumbs up and we headed for our rooms. When I went into mine, all of my stuff was there with a note on my dresser.

Don't think I didn't catch you daydreaming about me, honey. I'll always be watching.

I looked up horrified. Tigerclaw was in my head now. And I have no idea how to get him out. Since I was so tired, I just took my shoes off and buried my head under the warm covers of my new bed.

I was standing in the forest watching a fire in front of me. I stared at it, horrified. Silhouettes of cats stood in the fire watching me. The cats lifted their tails as if in greeting. Could these cats help with the prophecy?

Spottedleafs words ran through my head: "Fire will save the Clan!"

Tigerclaw's POV:

I growl at Fireheart once again. He was muttering 'fire!' and 'clan!' over and over.

"Wake up Fireheart!" I growl.

Fireheart shot out of his bed.

"You muttering in your sleep!"

"Sorry,"

Don't need to apologize,

Shut up,

You shut up!

Are we going to see Blazefur?

Yes!

As soon as I walked into her room, I couldn't help but grin. I took off my shoes and quietly slipped into the bed. She curled her body around her pillow and buried half of her head underneath the blanket. She sighed, lifted her head, and opened her eyes. The evening sun made her ocean blue orbs even better than usual.

"Why are you so gorgeous?" I ask.

"I don't know, ask StarClan," She answers sleepily.

I chuckled. I pressed tiny kisses all over her face until fully woke up. She giggled and squealed as she tried to get away from my grip.

"Tell me you love me, and I'll let you go." I demanded.

"No," She just giggled more.

"Tell me you love me or else,"

"Or else what?"

I gasped dramatically. "She did not just go there!"

"Oh, she just did," Blazefur smiled and climbed on my torso, putting her hands on my chest.

"Alright, now will you tell me you love me?"

She leaned down and caressed my cheek. "I love you,"

Her voice was a melody I hadn't ever heard. It had been a long time since someone told me they loved me. I brushed the hair out of her face and let her rest her head on my chest. One hand was playing with her hair while the other hand was rubbing soft circles on her

back.

"I love you too," I knew that if we were ever able to love each other, that we would have to keep it a secret. Zach and Brokenstar already knew I had a soft side for her. They called it a weakness. In order to keep her safe right now, all I could do was sit back and enjoy it for as long as possible.

"Now that your eyes are open, make the sun jealous with your burning passion to start the day. Make the sun jealous or stay in bed," I whispered.

"Make the sun jealous. But... Can we stay like this for a while? It's nice." She asked nervously; almost as if I would get mad at her.

"Of course," I whispered hoarsely. Blazefur turned around so her back was pressed against my chest.

I brushed her hair away from her shoulder and started gently kissing her shoulder and the nape of her neck hungrily.

Blazefur's POV:

I sat beside Fireheart and Graystripe as we finished eating our dinner. We had just finished sharing a meal beside the camp clearing. The sun had set and I could see the moon, almost full now, gleaming in a cold, clear sky. The past few days had been busy. It seemed that every time we lay down for a rest, Tigerclaw sent us out on patrol or a hunting mission. Fireheart had stayed alert, looking for a chance to talk with Bluestar alone, but when he wasn't on one of Tigerclaw's missions, the ThunderClan leader always seemed to have her deputy at her side.

I saw tired of telling Fireheart that he didn't need to tell Bluestar about the recent events that happened, but he was more stubborn than I thought.

"What are you looking for?" meowed Graystripe through a tongueful of fur.

"Bluestar," Fireheart answered, lowering his paw.

"Oh my gosh! Will please stop? Tigerclaw isn't evil and you don't need to warn her about him. And Ravenpaw doesn't even want you to tell her cause then she'll tell the whole clan!" I growled.

"I only promised to tell Tigerclaw he was dead. Bluestar should know the whole story. She needs to know what her deputy is capable of." Fireheart grizzled back.

"Tigerclaw isn't capable of anything bad! Why do I have to keep telling you that?"

"Guys! Stop! We only have Ravenpaw's word that Tigerclaw killed Redtail. It means nothing and-" Graystripe opened his mouth to say more but I continued.

"We need more evidence. Tigerclaw isn't capable of murder until we find evidence. So leave it ALONE!"

"Don't you believe him?" Fireheart seemed shocked.

"Look, if Tigerclaw lied about killing Oakheart in revenge for Redtail's death, that means Redtail must have killed Oakheart himself. And I can't believe that Redtail would have deliberately killed another Clan deputy in battle-

"It goes against the warrior code—we fight to prove our strength and defend our territory, not to kill each other." I finished for Graystripe.

"But I'm not trying to make accusations against Redtail!" Fireheart protested. "It's Tigerclaw who is the problem."

Damn. This kid won't give up.

"What you're saying has implications for Redtail's honor. And none of the other cats have a problem with Tigerclaw. It was only Ravenpaw who was scared of him."

"So you think Ravenpaw made the story up because he didn't get along with his mentor?" he meowed scornfully.

"No," mumbled Graystripe. "I just think we should be careful."

We had been warriors for only a few days, so we were in no position to start hurling accusations at the Clan's most senior warrior. And especially since it was Tigerclaw.

"It's fine," Fireheart whispered, "You guys can stay out of it."

Graystripe and I continued washing. I caught a glimpse of Bluestar emerging from her den alone only to jump onto the highrock. Fireheart lashed his tail.

Graystripe's ears flicked excitedly as he heard Bluestar's call. "A naming ceremony?" he meowed. "It must be Longtail getting his first apprentice. He's been dropping hints for days."

As arrogant as Longtail was I was proud of how he raised his daughter, Lilackit. She had a heart like an angel and a stare like a devil. Anyone could be hypnotized by her.

A small black-and-white kit padded into the clearing. His soft paws made no sound on the hard earth. He walked toward the Highrock with his pale eyes lowered and I almost expected to see him tremble —there was something in the slope of this kit's shoulders that made him seem too young and timid to be an apprentice.

Longtail won't be impressed, My cat snorted.

Be quiet!

"From this day forward," Bluestar meowed, staring down at the kit, "until he has earned his warrior name, this apprentice will be called Swiftpaw."

There was no flash of determination in the eyes of the black-and-white kit as he looked up at his leader. Instead, his amber eyes were wide with anxiety

Fireheart and I turned our heads as Longtail padded toward his new apprentice. Bluestar spoke again. "Longtail, you were Darkstripe's apprentice. He taught you well, and you have become a fierce and loyal warrior. I hope you will pass some of these qualities on to Swiftpaw."

I searched Longtail's face for an expression of disdain as he looked down at Swiftpaw. But the warrior's eyes softened as he met his new apprentice's gaze, and gently the two Clan cats touched noses. "It's okay, you're doing fine," Longtail murmured encouragingly.

Yeah, right, I thought bitterly. *Just because he's Clanborn. Longtail sure didn't welcome me like that.* I glanced around the rest of the Clan and felt a pang of resentment as they began to murmur congratulations to the new apprentice. I had Warrior blood but I never grew up here. They won't respect me until I prove myself.

"What's up with you?" whispered Graystripe. "That'll be us one day." Fireheart and I nodded, suddenly cheered by the thought of getting our own apprentices, and pushed away my resentment. I was a part of ThunderClan now, and surely that was all that mattered?

Full moon

Chapter 2
The moon taught me to give light, even when incomplete

[image]

♛♛♛

"Have you got maggot-gut or something?" meowed Graystripe beside Fireheart. "You're pulling some very weird faces!"

Fireheart turned to Graystripe with a grimace on his face. "It's nothing,"

Yeah, he's lying. "Come on. I hear Bluestar calling."

We trotted over to the group as we listened for our names. Mine and Lilypaw's were called. She trotted over to me happily.

"First gathering, huh?" We changed into our human forms and I draped an arm over her shoulder.

"Yep!" She beamed at me as I gave her a leg up onto her horse, Raven.

I chuckled and then I remembered my first gathering. The dark thought swept through my mind like a gust of wind. I wouldn't ever be able to forgive myself if a man lay one hand on her. I searched the group looking for someone who might want to watch her. I knew I couldn't choose, Tigerclaw, Fireheart, Graystripe, or Darkstripe. Tigerclaw'll be sitting with the deputies. Fireheart and Graystripe are going to be talking with the other Warriors and Darkstripe would leave her somewhere.

Then I spotted Mousefur and Longtail. The couple left Lilackit with

Goldenflower so they could go to the gathering. I knew Runningwind would've been happy to watch her but he's not here.

"Stay here," I whispered to my confused little sister.

If only Ravenpaw were here. Swallowing back sadness, I trotted over to Mousefur and Longtail. They both seemed surprised to see me but didn't shoo me away.

"I'm sorry if this is a burden, but I was wondering if Lilypaw could stay with you guys? After my first gathering..." I trailed away.

Mousefur's eyes softened. "Of course she can stay with us. I heard some stuff about you and the ShadowClan warrior but... You know what I don't want t to intrude." She whispered.

"The warrior who killed Spottedleaf," I shuddered at the horrible memory.

Longtail's head shot up and stared at me. Even he couldn't find the right words to say. They both apologized. I told Lilypaw to go with them and she didn't argue. In front of me, I saw Fireheart catching up with Bluestar. I growled in annoyance.

"Take the lead, Tigerclaw," He nodded at her and winked at me which made my heart leap. Everybody trotted ahead as Bluestar, Fireheart, and I went to a slow sitting trot.

Bluestar stopped and faced us. "Well, what is it?"

He hesitated. I just got more annoyed. "Ravenpaw's alive,"

I blurt. Bluestar raised her brows "Graystripe, Blazefur, Lilypaw, and I took him to WindClan's hunting grounds. I...I think he may have joined Barley." Barley was a loner, not a forest cat but not a kittypet either. He lived on a farm that lay on the route to Highstones, a sacred place for all the cats in the forest.

Fireheart clenched his teeth and waited for Bluestar's response. I sighed. After several long moments, Bluestar spoke. "I am glad to hear that Ravenpaw is still alive. I hope he is happier living with Barley than he was in the forest."

"B-but he was born in ThunderClan!" Fireheart stammered.

"That doesn't necessarily mean he was suited to Clan life," Bluestar pointed out. "After all, you aren't Clanborn, yet you've become a fine warrior. Ravenpaw may find his true path elsewhere."

"But he didn't leave ThunderClan because he wanted to," Fireheart protested. My eyes widened in shock. "It was impossible for him to stay!"

"Impossible?" Bluestar rested her blue gaze on him. "What do you mean?"

Fireheart's head turned towards me.

Don't, I mouthed.

"Ravenpaw knew a secret about Tigerclaw," he croaked. "I...I think Tigerclaw was planning to kill him. Or else turn the Clan against him."

"Blazefur," I snapped my head towards her. "let me hear your side of the story,"

"Ravenpaw *told* us that he had seen Tigerclaw kill Redtail. But when he told us this he was hyperventilating. And, I'm sure, you know that Ravenpaw *did* have an imagination. There's a slim chance Tigerclaw could've killed Redtail but I highly doubt it." I finished.

"Fireheart, your side,"

Fireheart answered reluctantly, meeting her stern expression as boldly as he dared. "That Tigerclaw killed Redtail in the battle with RiverClan."

Bluestar's eyes narrowed. "A warrior would never kill another of his Clan! Even you should know that—you've lived with us long enough."

Fireheart swallowed and I knew he was trying his best not to cry. Bluestar went on. "Tigerclaw reported that it was RiverClan's deputy, Oakheart, who killed Redtail," she said. "Ravenpaw must be

mistaken. Did he see Tigerclaw kill Redtail?"

"He said he did."

"And you know that by saying this, you are questioning Redtail's honor because he must have been the cat that was responsible for Oakheart's death? One deputy would never kill another in battle, not if it could be avoided. And Redtail was the most honorable warrior I have ever known." Bluestar's eyes clouded with pain.

"I cannot account for Redtail's actions," he murmured. "I only know that Ravenpaw truly believes Tigerclaw was responsible for Redtail's death."

Bluestar sighed and relaxed her shoulders. "We all know that Ravenpaw has a vivid imagination," she whispered gently, her eyes sympathetic. "He was badly injured in the battle, and he left before the fighting was over. Can you be sure he didn't fill in the parts he'd missed?"

Tigerclaw cantered out of the undergrowth. His eyes flickered suspiciously over Fireheart for a moment before he addressed Bluestar.

"We're waiting for you at the border." Bluestar nodded. "Tell them we'll be there in a moment." Tigerclaw dipped his head, turned, and raced back through the ferns.

She was right; Ravenpaw did have a strong imagination. Fireheart and I jumped as Bluestar started walking away.

"Are you going to bring Ravenpaw back to the Clan?" he asked. Bluestar gazed deep into Fireheart's eyes.

"He is probably happier where he is," she said quietly. "For now, we will let the Clan carry on believing he is dead." Fireheart and I stared back at her, our eyes wide with shock. Bluestar was going to lie to the Clan!

"Tigerclaw is a great warrior, but he is very proud," Bluestar went on. "It'll be easier for him to accept that his apprentice died in battle rather than ran away. And it would be better for Ravenpaw, too."

"Because Tigerclaw might go looking for him?" Fireheart dared to ask.

"No. Tigerclaw might be ambitious, but he is not a murderer. Ravenpaw will be better remembered as a dead hero than a live coward." Tigerclaw's call sounded again, and Bluestar disappeared into the ferns. Fireheart and I cantered after Bluestar.

We got to the rest of the group and soon we were cantering down the slope.

Bluestar halted on the edge of the clearing with her Clan lined up beside her. Some of the cats from RiverClan and ShadowClan turned and acknowledged their arrival.

"Where'd you disappear to?" Graystripe appeared at Fireheart's shoulder. Fireheart shook his head.

"Doesn't matter." He mumbled. I turned my head to peer around the clearing.

"Hey, look," I whispered. "The ShadowClan cats are looking stronger than I thought they would. After all, Brokenstar left them half-starved."

Fireheart followed my gaze to a sleek ShadowClan warrior. "You're right," he agreed.

"Mind you, we did do most of their fighting for them!" scoffed Graystripe.

Firheart's snort was interrupted by Whitestorm. "The ShadowClan cats fought as hard as we did to chase out Brokenstar. We should honor their determination to recover," he murmured sternly before padding over to a group of warriors gathered beneath one of the great oaks.

We hopped odd our horses and walked around. Soon two warriors were approaching us. A small brown apprentice tagged after them. I recognized the gray tabby tom from ShadowClan, but not the smoky black tom who walked with him. "Hi!" meowed the gray tom."Hello, Wetfoot," replied Fireheart. He glanced at the dark

brown cat. Wetfoot meowed, "This is Blackclaw of RiverClan."

We nodded their greeting. The apprentice stepped timidly forward.

"And this is my apprentice, Oakpaw," added Wetfoot. Oakpaw looked up at Fireheart with wide, anxious eyes.

"H-hi, Fireheart," he murmured. Fireheart nodded his head in greeting.

"I hear Bluestar made you warriors after the battle," meowed Wetfoot. "Congratulations! It must've been a cold vigil."

"It was!" Graystripe agreed.

"Who's that?" Fireheart broke in. A sleek she-cat with a mottled brown pelt had caught his attention. She was sharing words with Tigerclaw beside the Great Rock that stood in the center of the clearing.

"That's Leopardfur, our deputy," growled the RiverClan warrior. I furrowed my brows. Wasn't he glad Leapordfur was his deputy?

When the cats had settled in front of the Great Rock, Bluestar spoke. "ThunderClan brings to this Gathering their new medicine cat, Yellowfang," she announced formally.

She paused while all eyes turned to the old she-cat with the thick fur and flattened muzzle. Fireheart noticed her shuffle her haunches on the hard ground. Early in his apprenticeship, he and I had spent almost a whole moon nursing the she-cat back to health after she had come to the ThunderClan camp. Now I could tell by the way her right ear twisted slightly that she was uncomfortable under the gaze of the other Clans. Yellowfang had been medicine cat to ShadowClan, and cats hardly ever left one Clan to join another.

She looked around the crowd slowly until she met the gaze of Runningnose, ShadowClan's new medicine cat. There was a brief pause; then they exchanged a respectful nod. Yellowfang's ear straightened and I relaxed.

Bluestar spoke again. "We also bring three newly named warriors—Fireheart, Graystripe, and Blazefur."

Everybody turned to stare at us and started to cheer our new names. I felt a blush creeping up on my cheeks as I heard Tigerclaw's voice from the huge crowd. The cheering died down as Nightpelt stepped forward, brushing past Bluestar to stand on the highest part of the rock.

"I, Nightpelt, have taken over the leadership of ShadowClan," he announced. "Our former leader, Brokenstar, broke the warrior code and we were forced to chase him out."

"No mention of the fact we helped them to do it," Graystripe whispered to me. I snorted and rolled my eyes.

Nightpelt continued, "The spirits of our ancestors have spoken to Runningnose and chosen me as a leader. I have not yet traveled to Mothermouth to receive StarClan's gift of nine lives, but I will make this journey tomorrow night while the moon is still full. After my vigil at the Moonstone, I shall be known as Nightstar."

"Where is Brokenstar now?" called a voice from the crowd. It was Frostfur, the white ThunderClan queen.

"I think we can assume that he has left the forest, with the other banished warriors. He knows it would be dangerous for him to try to return," answered Nightpelt.

"I hope so," She whispered.

RiverClan's leader, Crookedstar, stepped forward. "Let's hope Brokenstar has had the sense to leave the forest for good. His greed for territory threatened us all." Crookedstar waited for the yowls of agreement to die down before he went on. "While Brokenstar was ShadowClan's leader, I allowed him to hunt in our river. But now ShadowClan has a new leader, and this agreement can no longer stand. The prey in our river belongs to RiverClan alone."

I sucked in an unsteady breath as RiverClan started cheering. Nightpelt raised his voice. "ShadowClan has the same

needs as it did under Brokenstar. We have many mouths to feed, Crookedstar. You agreed with the whole of ShadowClan!"

They soon turned on each other, hissing and spitting. Bluestar stepped between them. "ShadowClan has suffered many losses recently," she mewed softly. "With fewer mouths to feed, Nightpelt, do you need RiverClan's fish?"

Nightpelt flattened his ears and dropped his head. Bluestar spoke again, this time more forcefully. "You have just driven out your leader and several of your strongest warriors! And Brokenstar went against the warrior code when he forced Crookedstar to agree to share the river."

Her icy blue gaze glinted in the moonlight as she growled, "Remember you have not even received your nine lives from StarClan. Are you so confident you can make these demands?"

Everybody was silent. Bluestar had won. Her voice softened. "We all know ShadowClan has suffered much these past few moons," she meowed. "ThunderClan has agreed to leave you in peace until you have had time to recover." She turned her gaze on Crookedstar. "I'm sure that Crookedstar will agree to show you the same respect."

Crookedstar narrowed his eyes and nodded. "But only as long as ShadowClan is not scented in our territory," he growled.

"You won't scent us, Crookedstar," meowed Nightpelt. "Bluestar was right—we don't need your fish. After all, we have the uplands to hunt in, now that WindClan has left their territory."

Suddenly, Crookedstar's eyes lit up. "That's true," he agreed. "This will mean extra prey for all of us."

Bluestar drew up her head sharply. "No! WindClan must return!"

Crookedstar and Nightpelt looked at the ThunderClan leader. "Why?" asked Crookedstar. "If we share WindClan's hunting grounds, it will mean more food for all our kits!"

Nightpelt pointed out.

"The forest needs four Clans," Bluestar insisted. "Just as we have Fourtrees, and four seasons, StarClan has given us four Clans. We must find WindClan as soon as possible and bring them home."

The ThunderClan cats raised their voices in support of their leader, but Crookedstar's impatient yowl rose above them. "Your argument is weak, Bluestar. Do we really need four seasons? Wouldn't you rather go without leaf-bare, and the cold and hunger it brings?"

Bluestar looked calmly at the warriors beside her. "StarClan gave us leaf-bare to let the earth recover and prepare for newleaf. This forest, and the uplands, have supported four Clans for generations. It is not up to us to challenge StarClan."

Leopardfur, the RiverClan deputy, spoke up. "Why should we go hungry for the sake of a Clan that cannot even defend its territory?" she yowled.

"Bluestar is right! WindClan must return!" Tigerclaw spat back, drawing himself up so that he towered above the cats around him. Even I would want to shrink into the earth by his voice. But I knew he wouldn't use that voice on me. At least, I hope so.

Bluestar spoke again. "Crookedstar," she meowed, turning to the RiverClan leader, "RiverClan'shunting grounds are known for their richness. You have the river and all the fish it contains. Why do you need extra prey?" Crookedstar looked away and didn't answer.

The RiverClan people squirmed uncomfortably. "And Nightpelt," Bluestar went on, "it was Brokenstar who drove WindClan from their home." The broad-shouldered she-cat paused. "That is why ThunderClan helped you to chase him out."

I knew what she was doing. She was reminding them of the debt they still owed to ThunderClan. The ShadowClan leader half-closed his eyes. After a silence that felt like an age, Nightpelt opened his eyes wide and meowed, "Very well, Bluestar. We will allow WindClan to return." Fireheart saw Crookedstarturn his head away in anger, his eyes black slits.

Bluestar nodded. "Two of us have agreed, Crookedstar," she

meowed. "WindClan must be found and brought home. Until then, no Clan should hunt in their territory."

The Gathering began to break up as the cats prepared to travel back to their camps. I stayed where I was for a moment, watching the leaders on the Great Rock. Bluestar touched noses withCrookedstar and jumped down to the forest floor. On the rock, Crookedstar turned to Nightpelt. There was something about the look that passed between them that made my fur prickle. Could it be that Bluestar did not really have Nightpelt's support after all? I looked quickly around. I could tell from the anger in Tigerclaw's eyes that ThunderClan's deputy had not missed this exchange either.

Fireheart saw it too. For once, the three of us shared a concern. This was a shift in Clan alliances I had not expected. After the risk ThunderClan had taken by helping ShadowClan to drive out Brokenstar, how could they side with RiverClan now?

A/N

I'm screaming! hqvdfkuawlbfawefyaiwbf! I have 1k reads! Thank you so sos so so so so so so so sosososososoosososososososososo much! I love you guys! Please vote comment and share!

Finding out the truth

Chapter 3
It was always you

[image]

♛♛♛

Bluestar led the way swiftly back to camp. The noise of their return awoke the cats who had remained behind. As the group streamed through the gorse entrance, sleepy figures emerged from the dens.

"What's the news?" called Halftail.

"Were ShadowClan there?" asked Willowpelt.

"Yes, they were," Bluestar replied gravely. She strode past Willowpelt, transformed into the cat form, and leaped up onto Highrock. There was no need for her customary call for a Clan meeting; the cats were already gathering below the rock. Tigerclaw jumped up beside her.

"There was much tension between the Clans tonight," Bluestar began.

"And I became aware of a possible new allegiance between Crookedstar and Nightpelt."

Graystripe squeezed in between Fireheart and I.

"What are they talking about?" he asked.

"The new allegiance between RiverClan and ShadowClan," I murmur.

"I thought Nightpelt agreed with Bluestar," he turned to me.

"He did," Fireheart whispered.

"Nightpelt?" croaked One-eye's ancient voice from the back of the crowd.

"He has been named as ShadowClan's new leader," Bluestar explained.

"But his name; hasn't he been accepted by StarClan yet?" asked One-eye.

"He plans to travel to the Moonstone tomorrow night," Tigerclaw told him. "No leader can speak for their Clan at a Gathering without receiving StarClan"s approval first," muttered One-eye, loudly enough for all the cats to hear.

"Well, obviously he thinks differently." I snorted.

"He has the support of ShadowClan, One-eye," answered Bluestar, nodding at the old she-cat.

"He cannot ignore what he said tonight." One-eye gave a disgruntled sniff, and Bluestar lifted her head to address the whole Clan.

"At the Gathering, I suggested we find WindClan and bring them home. But Crookedstar and Nightpelt don't want them to return."

"They're hardly likely to join forces, though, are they?" called Graystripe. "They almost had a scrap over hunting rights in the river." Fireheart and I turned to Graystripe.

"Didn't you see the looks they were swapping by the end of the meeting? They're both desperate to get their paws on WindClan's

territory." I exchanged looks with ThunderClan.

"But why?" asked Sandpaw, who was sitting beside her mentor, Whitestorm. Whitestorm answered her.

"I suspect ShadowClan is not as weak as we thought they would be. And Nightpelt seems to have more ambition than any cat expected."

"But why does RiverClan want to hunt WindClan's grounds? They have always grown fat on the fish from their precious river!" yowled Willowpelt.

"The uplands are a long way to go for a few windblown rabbits!" The once-beautiful queen, Dappletail, spoke up in a voice cracked with age. "At the Gathering, some of the RiverClan elders spoke of Twolegs taking over part of their river."

"Do any of you realize that they're probably starving to death? Admit it, ShadowClan is *never* skittish. Sometimes it makes you wonder what's going on in that little Clan of theirs!" I cross my arms over my chest.

"Blazefur is right. I bet they think they can find more prey since WindClan's gone," Tigerclaw followed my actions.

"Right now, they're probably looking at WindClan's territory like it's a piece of gold. And the more land they have-" I looked over at Tigerclaw.

"The more land they have to expand and get stronger," He finished.

"You have excellent thinking, Tigerclaw, and Blazefur, but we must sit back and watch for now. We must be very careful not to give them an idea to become closer. Go and rest now. Runningwind and Dustpaw, you will take the dawn patrol."

A cold breeze rattled the dying leaves in the trees overhead. The people, still murmuring amongst themselves, went to their dens. I uncrossed my arms and headed into the Warrior's den. I considered going to Tigerclaw's room but I was too tired for that.

I went to the bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror. I sighed miserably and looked down. When I looked back up, I saw Tigerclaw standing behind me. I jumped in fright.

"Sorry," he apologized cheesily.

"It's fine, I just didn't smell you." I picked up my hairbrush and combed my hair vigorously.

Tigerclaw stole the brush from my hands and started putting my hair in a bun. I opened my mouth questionably but he looked so concentrated that I didn't say anything. I shut my eyes, enjoying the feeling of his hands in my hair. Tigerclaw held the bun with one hand and took two hairbands off of my wrist with the other.

I looked at the bun in the mirror. "Thank you,"

I smiled slightly. Tigerclaw nodded. Sometimes he talked a lot, the other times not so much.

"How did you learn that?" I made eye contact with him in the mirror.

"My sister," His face was emotionless. I guessed she wasn't here anymore. I didn't push him to say anything more. I could tell it was a touchy subject.

I stepped out of the bathroom and stripped out of the layers of clothing. I had every piece of clothing off except my undergarments. I'm glad it was a matching set.

Tigerclaw didn't miss the opportunity to take his shirt off as well. I smiled at his enthusiasm. He pulled me towards his chest. He looked so handsome that I didn't know why I bothered to blush for Fireheart at all. I didn't understand him, yet I felt like I knew him for years.

He pulled me in for a kiss but I shrugged away. Tigerclaw sighed. "You are *very* frustrating,"

I let out a girlish giggle. "I am?"

"Yes," he muttered, pressing his lips to my collarbone.

"I'm so very sorry," I smiled.

Tigerclaw raised his head, and I took my opportunity to give him a teasing kiss. I stood on my toes and gave him a slow kiss. He smiled into my lips and kissed me back. I wrapped my arms around his neck and jumped into his arms. I wrap my legs around his waist as Tigerclaw moved towards the bed. We both flopped down on the bed. The kisses he gave me were desperate. He kissed me harder.

He wouldn't let go of me. His grip was tight but not suffocating. It wasn't comforting anymore.

"Tigerclaw," I breathed, running my hand through his hair.

"Blazefur," He muttered back, squeezing my waist.

His lips made contact with my neck, and I made no move to get him away. "Tigerclaw," I repeated, harsher than before.

"What?" he groaned, pressing a trail of kisses on my collarbone. He'd never really been this needy. We've been very close the whole night. I knew something was wrong.

"What's wrong?" I ask softly. Tigerclaw rested his head on my chest.

His breathing became uneven. Then I felt little droplets. I'd never once seen him cry. Then a sob shook his body. I managed to rest his head on my shoulder and hush his cries. I felt my tears starting to form, just listening to him. I rubbed my hand up and down his back.

"What's wrong?" I repeated.

"Y-you're leaving-g," He sobbed into a shoulder.

My eyes widened in alarm. "When?"

"Tomorrow... Bluestar is sending you to find WindClan..... You're leaving..." He lifted his head. His amber eyes were puffy and red with tears. I wipe his now-tear-stained cheeks.

"Only me?"

"No - you, Fireheart, and Graystripe," He sniffed.

I fell back onto the pillow. Tigerclaw continued, "I'm afraid to lose you... I-I can't lose you... I'm afraid of the monster that'll come back,"

I stare at him questioningly. "Tigerclaw, you're not a monster... why would you think that?"

He swallowed. "I haven't been telling you the truth. Blazefur - I - the night on Sunning Rocks, I never killed Oakheart and Oakheart never killed Redtail."

He was now sitting up in bed. My heart thundered against my chest. Fireheart isn't right. He can't be.

"What do you mean?" I asked cautiously. I slowly started to inch away from him. Whatever he was about to tell me would rock my world.

"Oakheart was fighting Redtail. There was a bit of a cliff and it fell on them. Redtail was the only one that survived. After he crawled out we - we exchanged words and..." More tears dropped onto his cheeks.

"And then I killed him," As soon as the words left his mouth, I almost screamed.

He clamped his hand over my mouth as I started to sob. He had to be lying. All this time I've told Fireheart that it wasn't true.

"Why?" I sobbed into my hands.

"Why?" I repeated louder.

"You don't understand Blazefur!" Tigerclaw cried, "You changed me! I've never felt love! *Never*! All I wanted was power until you came into my life! That's why I'm afraid of losing you! That's why I keep us hidden! Brokenstar knows! He knows everything!"

I couldn't even process what happened. Tigerclaw killed Redtail. Fireheart was right. Brokenstar knows about us. Zach knows about us. Tigerclaw and I are drowning in deep shit right now.

"I'm so sorry. I'm sorry that we fell in love. I'm sorry that I hurt you. I'm sorry that I lied to you. I'm sorry that I killed Redtail. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Tigerclaw sobbed into my shoulder.

He delicately wrapped his arms around me. At that moment, I knew the only good thing to do was listen to him and comfort him the best I could. I ran a hand through his hair.

"I'm the villain in this story, Blazefur. I'm the bad guy. I don't deserve you," He muttered hoarsely.

I grabbed his face and made him look at me. His beautiful amber eyes were now puffy and red. I used the pad of my thumb to wipe each tear away. I chewed my lip and planned out the words I was going to say.

"You were never the villain in *my* story," I started slowly, words still forming in my head, "I love you. I will always love you-"

I pause. I'll tell him that no matter what he did, I would love him. "Look, no one wants us together. But you know what? Fuck that. I don't give a shit if nobody wants us together. Because in the end, it will always be us. It's never about the clan or Fireheart or *anybody*. It's about us. So fuck them. I don't care what you did. That was in the past. This is the present—the future. We learn from our mistakes. We don't let them haunt us. I love you so much. Don't *ever* forget that, okay?"

The next thing I know, I'm engulfed in a deep kiss. Salty tears streamed down both of our faces. When we pulled away from each other, we were both breathing heavily. We stayed this way for a couple of minutes. Not moving or saying a word. Just staying in each other's presence was enough to calm us down.

"I love you," Tigerclaw murmured into my neck, running a hand down my spine.

"I love you," I whispered back.

I groaned and turned in my bed. That wonderful fresh woods, pine, and the smoke smell wafted into my nose. I sighed in contentment. Large, warm hands were wrapped securely around my waist.

"Good morning," I smiled into his chest.

"Mhm," Tigerclaw grumbled.

Oh, I think I just- the cat inside my head moans.

Shut up! It's too damn early!

I just love Tigerclaw's morning voice.

"Blazefur," He mumbled sleepily, "I have to get up. It's five in the morning."

"It's too early!" I wrapped my arms and legs around him and went full-on sloth mode.

"Blazefur!" He whined, "Bluestar's probably wondering where I am!"

"No, she's not! She's in her bed, sleeping as everybody should at this time!" I wailed.

Tigerclaw sighed, defeated. *Ten more minutes,* I mumbled through the link. *Fine,* he grumped.

And he kept his promise. He stayed ten more minutes. I had fallen back asleep by the time he needed to get out of bed. I was having an amazing dream when all of a sudden Fireheart decided to pour water on me. I awoke with a shriek and flung myself at him with a knife in hand.

"IT'S ME!!! WAIT!" He screamed and cowered to the ground.

"That's what I thought! Leave me alone and get out!" I pointed at the door angrily.

"How'd you even get that?" he whimpered slightly, pointing at the

sharp object in my hand.

"Don't question me," I grumbled, "Now get out please."

"As you wish." Fireheart bowed and stumbled out of the door.

I got ready like usual and french braided my hair. When I got outside, Fireheart and Graystripe had been waiting for me. The sun was beginning to turn the sky pink, and there was frost on the trees around the camp.

"Bluestar needs to see us," Graystripe said to me as we walked to her cabin.

The three of us bounded across the clearing to Bluestar's cabin and announced our arrival with hushed hellos.

"Enter!" It was Tigerclaw's voice that answered from behind the draped lichen.

Fireheart stiffened beside me. Was this about last night? About what he said to Bluestar? I swallowed. Graystripe wouldn't be dragged into this if it were about last night. Graystripe pushed his way into Bluestar's den.

Bluestar was sitting at her desk, her head up and her eyes bright. Tigerclaw leaned against her desk. I tried to read his expression, but his eyes were as cold and steady as always. They landed on me and softened dramatically.

Bluestar began at once. "Fireheart, Graystripe, Blazefur, I have an important mission for you."

"A mission?" Fireheart echoed.

"I want you to find WindClan and bring them back to their territory," announced Bluestar.

"Before you get too excited, bear in mind this could be very dangerous," Tigerclaw growled. "We don't know where WindClan has gone, so you will have to follow what is left of their scent– probably into hostile territory."

"But you've been through WindClan territory, when you traveled with me to the Moonstone," Bluestar pointed out. "Their scent will be familiar, as will the Twoleg territory beyond the uplands."

"How long will this mission last?" I ask quietly.

"However long it takes you to find Windclan," Tigerclaw answered steadily.

"Will it just be us?" asked Fireheart.

"Our other warriors are needed here," he said, "Winter is coming, and we need to gather as much food as possible. Many prey-poor moons lie ahead."

Bluestar nodded. "Tigerclaw will help you prepare for the journey." Fireheart shifted beside me. He doesn't trust Tigerclaw. He's uneasy about Tigerclaw helping.

"You must leave as soon as possible," Bluestar continued.

"Good luck."

"We'll find them," Graystripe promised.

I wonder how long it will take us to find them. If we ever do.

Tigerclaw followed us out of Bluestar's den. "Do you remember how to get to WindClan territory?"

"Oh, yes, Tigerclaw, we were there only—"

Fireheart interrupted Graystripe's eager reply, "Only a few months ago," he said quickly. He flashed a warning glare at Graystripe. He had almost given away our journey several nights earlier with Ravenpaw.

Tigerclaw hesitated. I held my breath. Had he noticed Graystripe's mistake?

"And can you recall WindClan's scent?" he asks begrudgingly.

We nodded.

"You will need herbs for strength and to keep your hunger away. Fetch them from Yellowfang before you leave." Tigerclaw paused. "And don't forget that Nightpelt is planning to travel to the Moonstone tonight. Keep well out of his way."

"And if we do? What will we tell him?"

"Relax, Blazefur, we boys will make sure you're safe." Graystripe cast me a flirtatious smile.

"I can take care of myself, thank you." I glared at him.

"Blazefur's right though. If you run into him, don't tell him where you're going. Don't anger them either; they won't hesitate to attack." Tigerclaw sighed.

"So improvise and hope we don't get killed?" Fireheart asked.

"Sure," he shrugged, "Now go!"

He walked away. I stare after him, hoping I have one last chance to say goodbye.

"He might have wished us good luck," Graystripe complained.

"He probably thinks we don't need it," Fireheart joked as they crossed the clearing toward Yellowfang's cabin.

"Yellowfang!" Graystripe called. "We've come for traveling herbs!"

I heard a hoarse voice from the shadow in the door, and Yellowfang squeezed out.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"We've got to find WindClan and bring them home," Fireheart told her, cracking a grin.

"Your first warrior mission!" rasped Yellowfang. "Congratulations! I'll fetch the herbs you will need." She returned a few moments later

carrying a small bundle of dried leaves.

"Enjoy!" she smiled, putting them in our hands.

"Yuck!" spat Graystripe. "Justas bad as last time." Fireheart nodded, scrunching his nose.

Spottedleaf had given us the same herbs whenthey'd journeyed with Bluestar to the Moonstone. I almost gagged the first time I ate them. Graystripe swallowed the last mouthful and nudged Fireheart's shoulder.

"Come on, slowslug! Let's get going! 'Bye," he called to Yellowfang over his shoulder, as he sprinted out of the clearing.

"Wait for me!" called Fireheart. We raced after Graystripe.

"Good-bye! Good luck, youngsters!" Yellowfang called after us.

We went to our rooms and packed out leather satchels with as much as we needed. I quickly grabbed my mom's switchblade and my bow and arrows. I made sure my hair was braided tight, for we weren't going to shower for a while.

I walk out of the cabin and see Tigerclaw walking out of the stable with Midnight and Lancer. Graystripe was given Lionheart's horse after he passed. Fireheart came out with his horse.

"We tacked them for you guys. You're welcome." Fireheart smiled sneakily.

"Cool," I replied with a smirk.

"No thank you? That hurts," He touched his chest dramatically.

I walk over to my horse and lower the stirrups. Tigerclaw walks behind me. The camp was shielded by Midnight. Tigerclaw secured the saddle sack and girth.

I turn to look at him. I grab the back of his neck and rest my forehead against his. He wraps his arms securely around my shoulders and pulls me as close as he could.

"I'm gonna be okay. I promise." I give him a smile of reassurance.

"Come home," He kissed me slow and soft.

That was the only thing we were truly worried about. Making sure we came home.

"I love-" Before I could finish, he kissed me again, this time more demanding.

"*Please, please,* come home, okay?" He pulled away from me.

I faintly hear Graystripe's and Fireheart's conversations. I nodded. There were no words to be said after that. I pulled him in for a hug. I tried to memorize his touch. Everything about him. His scent. His hair. His eyes.

"I'll give you a leg up," He murmured, pulling away.

I tried to ignore the sudden cold and stepped into his hand, hoisting myself onto the saddle. I put my feet in the stirrups and gave Midnight a squeeze. I don't look back when we trot out of the camp. I'm afraid if I do, I'd never be able to leave. It hurt me just as much knowing that Tigerclaw was watching me walk away with a look of longing, not knowing when I'd come back. If I did.

As we raced through the tunnel, I heard the ferns rustling in the morning breeze. They seemed tobe whispering, "Good luck! Travel safely!"

Before any of ya'll get mad, I've been dealing with a lot of family stuff and Sports so I haven't been able to update that much. I know what it feels like to wait and wait and hear the author say 'I'll update soon!' and then it almost never happens. I'll try and stay on top of this as much as possible. Happy reading!

memes cuz why not

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Author's note

A/N

I'm so sorry that I haven't updated in a long time. I started Marching band this year and it has taken up a lot of my free time. The time that I do have alone is either used to work on homework or spend time with family. I know how frustrating it is to have an author who kinda leaves it at a cliffhanger and doesn't ever update. I am working on some upcoming chapters so stay tuned! Again I'm so sorry and I hope you guys understand!

Mission

Chapter 4
The goal is to die with memories*, *not dreams

[image]

♛♛♛

As we headed out of the camp, we nearly crashed into Whitestorm, who was leadingSandpaw and Runningwind into the forest for the dawn patrol.

"Sorry!" panted Fireheart. He stopped, and I skidded to a halt beside him. Whitestorm dipped his head.

"I hear you three are going on a mission," he said.

"Yes," Fireheart replied.

"Then may you have StarClan's protection," Whitestorm gravely murmured.

"What for?" Sandpaw sneered. "You off to catch voles?"

"Oh! Dear no! They won't need it. They have me." I made sure to snarkily smirk at her.

Runningwind snorted and leaned into Sandpaw's ear to tell her something. Her expression changed and the annoyance in her green eyes switched to guarded curiosity.

The patrol stepped aside to let us pass. We raced on and climbed up the side of the ravine. Fireheart and Graystripe shared a few words as they followed the route through the forest to Fourtrees, saving their breath for the long journey ahead. I decided not to talk to get myself in the mood for the long journey we were facing. We paused at the top of the steep slope on the far side of the oak-shaded

clearing, our horses' sides heaving from the long climb.

"Is it always windy up here?" grumbled Graystripe, swiping back his incredibly thick hair against the blast of cold air that swept across the uplands.

"I suppose there aren't any trees to block it," Fireheart pointed out, squinting slightly. His hair was in his face too. This wasWindClan's territory. I lifted my head to smell the air and caught a whiff of something that wasn't supposed to be there.

"Do you smell RiverClan warriors?" Fireheart murmured uneasily. He smelt it too.

Graystripe lifted his nose. "No. Do you think there might be some here?"

"Maybe. They might want to make the most of WindClan's absence, especially since they knowWindClan will be back soon," I warned.

"Well, I can't smell anything now," whispered Graystripe. We walked watchfully along a frozen turf trail sheltered by heather.

A fresh scent stopped Fireheart's horse in its tracks. It snorted and threw its head up.

"Easy boy. Can you smell that?" he hissed to me.

"Yeah," whispered Graystripe, flattening himself against his horse.

"RiverClan!" Fireheart leads us into the bushes. Beside me, Graystripe lifted his head to peer over the bushes.

"I can see them," he murmured. "They're hunting."

Four RiverClan warriors were chasing a rabbit through a patch of gorse. I recognized Blackclawfrom the Gathering. The smoky-black warrior pounced, his claws unsheathed, but sat up again with nothing to show for the chase. The rabbit must have made it to the safety of her warren.

"What do we do?" I whispered cautiously.

"I guess we wait it out?" Graystripe's answer came out as more of a question.

Suddenly, I heard the approaching pawsteps of the RiverClan warriors.

"They're coming this way! We'll have to hide!" Fireheart hissed.

"What about the horses?" I hissed back.

"Hide them behind the bushes! Quick!" Graystripe dismounted quickly and me and Fireheart followed.

"Follow me," whispered Graystripe. "I smell badgers this way."

"Badgers?" Fireheart whisper yelled.

I stomped on his foot once again. *Be quiet you idiot!*

Sorry!

I swear he never learns...

"Badgers?" I echoed. "Is that safe?" I'd heard the story of how Halftail had lost his tail in a fight with a bad-tempered old brock.

"Don't worry. The scent is strong but stale," Graystripe reassured me. "There must be an old set near here."

"Are you sure it's abandoned?" I ask nervously.

"We'll know soon enough. Come on; we've got to get out of here," replied Graystripe. He led the way quickly through the low bushes. The rustle of heather told us the RiverClan warriors were closing in.

"Here!" Graystripe shouldered aside a tuft of heather to reveal a sandy hole in the ground. "Get inside! The badger's scent will disguise ours. We can wait till they're gone."

I squeezed in with both of them. Thank StarClan they've showered at least once this week. It wasn't big enough to fit all three of us

side by side so I'm partially on top of Fireheart right now. And let me tell you, it's not the most comfortable.

Pawsteps thudded on the ground overhead. We held our breath as the steps halted and one of the RiverClan warriors yowled, "Badger set!"

A second voice answered: "Is it abandoned? The rabbit may be hiding inside."

I shut my eyes and tried to calm my pounding heart. *Please pass by, please pass by. Just ignore us, it's not worth it.*

I repeated the same prayer, hoping we won't get caught.

"Wait; the scent leads this way," meowed Blackclaw. There was a scrabble of paws overhead as the RiverClan warriors charged away. I slowly let out a shaky breath.

"Do you think they're gone?"

"Perhaps we should wait a bit longer, make sure none of them stayed behind," Fireheart suggested.

I nodded. Graystripe nudged Fireheart and me. "Come on," he murmured.

We all squeezed out of the tiny hole. There was no sign of the RiverClanpatrol. The fresh breeze cleared my thoughts and I wiped my shakey hands on my pants.

"We should look for the WindClan camp," I say to Graystripe. "It'll be the best place to pick up their scent."

He nodded. We moved slowly through the heather, keeping our heads slightly upturned to pick up the scent of any more RiverClan warriors. We grabbed our horses and climbed ourselves. We stopped at the foot of a large flat rock that sloped up steeply, past the tops of the gorse bushes.

"I'll climb up and have a look around," offered Graystripe. "I'll blend better with the stone."

"Okay," Fireheart agreed. "But keep your head down." We watched our friend creep up the rock. Graystripe crouched at the top and gazed around the plateau, then skidded back down to me and Fireheart.

"There's a hollow over there, I think," Graystripe puffed, signaling with his hand. "I can see a gap in the heather."

"Let's check it out," Fireheart said. "It could be the camp."

"That's what I thought." Graystripe nodded. "It's probably the only place up here that's sheltered from the wind."

We mounted our horses and continued our journey. As we neared the hollow, Fireheart cantered past Graystripe and gazed over the edge. It looked as if a StarClan warrior had reached down from the sky, scooped a handful of peat from the plateau, and replaced it with a thick tangle of gorse that grew almost to the level of the ground on either side. I sniffed. I could smell many scents, all WindClan, old and young, male and female, and, in the background, the faint odor of fresh-kill that had long since become crowfood.

This had to be the abandoned camp. I cantered down the slope and plunged into the bushes. The gorse tugged at Midnight's fur and scratched her nose, she shook her head and kept walking. I could hear Graystripe behind me, cursing as thorns snagged his horse's ears.

We pushed through into a sheltered clearing. The sandy ground had been trodden hard by generations of paws. At one end of the clearing stood a rock, worn smooth by many windblown moons.

"This is their camp, all right," Fireheart murmured.

"I can't believe Brokenstar managed to drive WindClan out of such a well-protected place!" said Graystripe, rubbing his horse's nose with one hand.

"It looks like they put up a good fight," I pointed out, realizing with a jolt how badly ravaged the camp was. Clumps of fur littered the ground, and dried blood stained the sand. Cabin doors were wide

open, broken, or completely off the hinges while windows were shattered and glass littered the ground beneath them. And everywhere, stale ShadowClan scents mingled with the smell of terrified WindClan cats.

I shuddered. "Let's find the scent trail out of here," I say.

I began to sniff the air carefully and moved forward, following the strongest scent. Graystripe trotted after me to a narrow gap in the gorse.

"WindClan cats must be even smaller than I remember!" grumbled Graystripe as he squeezed through after me and Fireheart.

I glanced at my friend, amused for a moment. The scent trail was quite clear now—definitelyWindClan, but mixed and pungent, as if made by many frightened cats and people. I looked down. Drops of dried blood dotted the ground.

"We're heading the right way," Fireheart mumbled darkly. Two moons of rain and wind had failed to wash away the signs of suffering.

I could clearly picture the defeated and injuredClan fleeing from their home. With a surge of anger, I bounded after my friends. The trail led us to the far edge of the uplands, where we stopped to let our horses breathe.

In front of us, the ground sloped away to the human farmland. Far in the distance, where the sun was beginning to set, loomed the towering shapes of Highstones.

"I wonder if Nightpelt is there yet," Fireheart murmured. In a tunnel below Highstones lay the sacredMoonstone, where the leaders of each Clan shared dreams with StarClan.

"Well, we don't want to find him down there!" Graystripe flicked his hand at the wide expanse of human land. "It'll be hard enough dodging humans, rats, and dogs, without meeting the new ShadowClan leader as well!"

I nodded. I thought back to our last journey across this land, with

Bluestar and Tigerclaw. We had almost been killed by an attack of rats, and only the arrival of Barley, the loner, had saved them. Even so, Bluestar had lost one of her lives; the memory of it stung me like a wood ant.

"Do you think we'll find any trace of Ravenpaw down there?" Graystripe said, turning his face toward us.

"I hope so," Fireheart replied solemnly.

The last I had seen of Ravenpaw had been his back disappearing into the storm on the uplands. Had he made it safely to Barley'sterritory? The three of us started down the slope, carefully sniffing around to make sure we stayed on the WindClan trail.

"It doesn't look as if they were heading for Highstones," Graystripe remarked.

The trail took them sideways into a wide grassy field. We skirted the edge, staying near the hedgerow as WindClan had done. The scent led us out of the field and onto a human path through a small copse of trees.

"Look!" Graystripe gasped. Sun-bleached piles of prey bones lay scattered in the undergrowth. Mossybedding had been gathered beneath the thickest patches of brambles.

"WindClan must have tried to settle here," I say in surprise.

"I wonder what made them leave?" asked Graystripe, sniffing the air.

"The scent is old." Fireheart shrugged and the three of us followed the trail onward to a thick hedge.

With a bit of a struggle, we managed through onto a grass verge. Beyond a narrow ditch lay a wide earth track. Graystripe jumped nimbly over the ditch and onto the hard red track. I looked around, stiffening as I recognized a hard-edged silhouette in the distance.

"Graystripe! Stop!" I hissed.

"What's up?"

Fireheart pointed with his nose. "Look at that human territory over there! We must be near Barley'sterritory."

"That's where those dogs live! But WindClan definitely came this way. We'll have to hurry. We need to get past the human nest before sunset." Graystripe swallowed.

I remembered Barley telling them that the humans let the dogs loose at night, and the sun was already sinking toward the craggy tops of Highstones.

Fireheart nodded. "Perhaps the dogs chased WindClan out of the woods."

With an anxious twinge, I thought of Ravenpaw. And Lilypaw. I haven't talked to her in so long. I never know how she's holding up these days.

"Do you think he found Barley?" I asked.

"Who? Ravenpaw? Why not? We made it this far!" laughed Graystripe. "Don't underestimate him. Remember the time Tigerclaw sent him to Snakerocks? He came back with a snake!"

Fireheart chuckled at the memory as Graystripe leaped across the track and through the hedge on the far side. Fireheart and I cantered after him, quickening our pace to match our friends step for step. A dog barked furiously from the human nest, but its vicious snarling soon faded into the distance. The temperature plunged as the sun set, and frost began to form on the grass.

"Should we keep going?" asked Graystripe. "What if the trail takes us to Highstones after all? Nightpelt will definitely be there by now."

I lifted my nose and sniffed the browning fronds of some ferns. The smell of WindClan, sour with fear, pricked at me.

"We'd better keep going," I murmured. "We'll stop when we have to."

The cold breeze carried another odor to my nose—there was a road nearby. Graystripe screwed up his face. He'd smelled it too. We exchanged a look of dismay but pushed on. The stench grew stronger and stronger until we could hear the roar of the cars in the distance. By the time we reached the hedge that ran alongside the wide gray path, it was hard to make out the WindClan trail at all.

Graystripe stopped and looked around, uncertainty showing in his eyes. But I could just make out the fear-scent. I lead Midnight through the shadows beside the hedge until I reached a place where the hedge was less thick.

"They sheltered here," I called, imagining the terrified WindClan people staring through the hedge at the road.

"This was probably the first time most of them had seen the road," Graystripe remarked as he joined me by the hedge.

Fireheart looked at Graystripe in surprise. We had never met a WindClan cat—they had been driven out of their territory almost as soon as we had become apprentices.

"Didn't they patrol their borders?" he asked, puzzled. "You've seen their territory—it's pretty wild and barren, and the prey's not easy to catch. I guess they never thought any of the other Clans would bother hunting there. After all, RiverClan has their river, and, in a good year, our forests are filled with prey, so no cat needs their skinny rabbits."

A car roared past on the other side of the hedge, its headlights glowing. Fireheart and Graystripeflinched as the wind buffeted their hair even through the wall of leaves. I'm so glad I french braided my hair. When the noise faded away, we sniffed around the roots of the hedge.

"The trail seems to lead under here." Fireheart squeezed his horse onto the grass verge that lay along the road. Graystripe walked through behind him. I took up the rear. But on the other side of the hedge, the scent trail stopped abruptly.

"They must have either doubled back or crossed the Thunderpath,"

Fireheart growled. "You look around here, and I'll check out the other side." I could tell that he fought to keep his voice calm, but exhaustion was making him sound desperate. Surely we couldn't have lost the trail now, after coming so far?

I thought about Tigerclaw back home, waiting for me anxiously. I thought about Lilypaw back home, wondering when I would get back. I thought about Bluestar and Whitestorm hoping that we come back safely. Will we ever make out of this mission alive? Or will it take everything we ever had?

I'm trying to update more guys. I promise:)

Finding WindClan

Chapter 5
Change begins at the end of your comfort zone.
-Roy T. Bennett

[image]

♛♛♛

I waited until the only sound I could hear was the pounding of blood in my ears. Then I urged Midnight to the edge of the road. It stretched ahead of me, wide and foul-smelling, but silent. I give Midnight a good kick and she cantered across. I didn't stop until I reached the grass on the other side. The air here was tainted by the acrid smell of the road and its cars, so I headed toward the hedge. Still, there was no trace of the WindClan cats. I swallowed the lump in my throat. Suddenly a car tore past, making Mightnight leap into the air with terror. I pulled on her reigns and pushed my heels down.

Then I smelled it: the faintest trace carried on the wind that the car had stirred up. WindClan hadbeen here! I called as loudly as I could to Graystripe. There was a pause, then the sound of hoofs pounding across the road to join me.

"Have you found it?" puffed Graystripe.

"Not sure. I got a whiff, but I can't pinpoint it." I pushed my way through the hedge, Graystripe, and Fireheart right behind me. Fireheart lifted his nose toward the open field ahead of them.

"Have you any idea what's over there?" he nodded his head.

"No," replied Graystripe. "I shouldn't think any Clan person has ever been this far before."

"Except WindClan," muttered Fireheart darkly. I look down and sighed. The trail was suddenly clear from the confusing fumes of the road. WindClan had definitely come this way.

The three of us struck out through the long grass, straight across the field.

"Blazefur!" Graystripe sounded alarmed.

"What is it?" I sat up.

"Look!" Fireheart stopped and lifted his head too. I saw a road ahead of them arching high into the air on massive stone legs, illuminated by the eyes of the cars that moved along it. Another road ran below, veering off into the darkness. Graystripe nodded toward a tall thistle.

"And smell this!" I inhaled the scent. It was a fresh WindClan marker!

"They must have settled somewhere near here!" Graystripe murmured in disbelief.

"At least we're on the right track. We can't turn back now." I say.

Great StarClan, I really hope we find them.

"Me too," Fireheart murmured beside me.

I turned to look at him but he beat me to it. "You talk out loud sometimes."

My face heats up. Other than embarrassment, I was feeling excited and anxious at the same time. We looked silently at each other for a moment. Then, without a word, we moved on toward the stinking roads. Graystripe spoke at last.

"Why would WindClan come to a place like this?"

"I guess not even Brokenstar would want to follow them here," Fireheart answered grimly. He suddenly stopped.

Graystripe paused beside him and I brought up the rear.

"What is it?"

"If WindClan is hiding so near the Thunderpaths," Fireheart said slowly, "they must be fairly desperate not to be found. They're more likely to trust us if we arrive in daylight than if we creep up on them in darkness."

"Does that mean we can rest?" asked Graystripe, slumping in his saddle.

"Just until it's light," murmured Fireheart.

"We'll find somewhere to hide and see if we can get some sleep. Are you hungry?" Graystripe shook his head.

"Blazefur? Are you?" As appetizing as it sounded, I was, too, feeling sick.

"Me neither," Fireheart agreed. "I don't know if it's those herbs or because the stench from the road is making me feel sick."

"Where shall we sleep?" Graystripe looked around.

I looked around to find a couple of trees and a cover of bushes. "Over there,"

I could tell both of them were too tired to argue so we got off our horses, tied the horses up, and set up a small hideout. Fireheart offered to start a fire while me and Graystripe laid out our bedrolls.

I collapsed on the bedroll and faced the fire. Fireheart was poking at it with a stick. Graystripe had already fallen asleep and was snoring. As I stared at the fire, I remember those words Spottedleaf had told me a couple of months ago. *'Only a blazing fire will save our clan!'*.

"What do you think Spottedleaf was telling us about? And our dreams? What does this have to do with us?" Fireheart asked.

"Stop looking into my mind and maybe I'll tell you!" I growled at

him.

"Sorry. You just look different, that's all. I was making sure you were okay." He murmured glancing at me momentarily.

"I don't know. Maybe StarClan trusts us." I mumble, burying my head in the crook of my elbow.

"Maybe..." Fireheart's voice trailed away into dark silence. Early in the morning, I felt him lay beside me and that's when I fell into a dreamless sleep.

When I opened my eyes again, gray light was glowing through the trees. Dawn must be near. My bones ached from the cold hard ground. I nudged Graystripe and Fireheart, who both grunted.

"Get up! We have to keep moving." I yawned and stretched my overly sore muscles.

"I think we should head that way," Fireheart said, craning his neck away from the light. "I think the tunnel we saw earlier leads right under a road. It might take us nearer to the intersection."

Beside me, Graystripe nodded, and together we began to pack our stuff and mount our horses for the day. Before long I spotted light ahead of us. We quickened their pace until we were racing up a short, steep slope that led us into a world filled with gray dawn light. We had come up near the edge of a patch of barren, dirty grass. Roads enclosed it on two sides, and another arched overhead. A fire burned in the middle of the grass. A few humans lay around it. One of them stretched and rolled over, and another grunted angrily in its sleep, but the noise and stench from the roads didn't seem to wake them.

I watched them warily, then froze as something else caught my eye: dark outlines that flitted back and forth in front of the flames. Cats! Could it be WindClan? I looked at the fire and the cats and my mind flooded with the memory of my dream—the noise of the road, the sight of the flames and the cats, and Spottedleaf's voice murmuring, *'A blazing fire will save the Clan.'* A surge of emotion made my legs feel weak. Did this mean that ThunderClan's fate was

bound up with the fate of WindClan?

"Blazefur? Fireheart!" Graystripe's voice jolted me and Fireheart back to reality. I wasn't the only one that saw it.

"We must find Tallstar and speak with him," Fireheart said.

"Then you think it is WindClan?" asked Graystripe.

"You smelled their marker—who else could it be?" Fireheart replied.

Graystripe looked at us, his eyes shining with triumph.

"We found them!" I found myself smiling. Maybe this wasn't going to take so long after all. I didn't point out that finding WindClan was only half of our mission. We still had to convince them that it was safe to return home. Graystripe braced himself, ready to canter forward.

"Let's go!"

"Hang on," I warned. "We don't want to startle them."

Just then, one of the humans sat up with a jolt and began shouting at the ragged cats around the fire. The noise roused the other humans, who joined in with rough, angry voices. The WindClan cats scattered. All caution forgotten, Fireheart, Graystripe, and I raced after them. Every instinct told me to keep away, but I dared not lose sight of the fleeing WindClan cats. We charged into the safety of the shadows beneath the soaring road. Ahead, I watched the WindClan cats stop close to one of the road's great stone legs. And then, one by one, the cats disappeared into the ground.

"Where did they go?" gasped Graystripe in amazement.

"Another tunnel?" I suggested. "Come on, let's find out."

Cautiously, we approached the spot where the WindClan cats had vanished. As we neared, we saw a hole in the earth. Like their resting place on the previous night, the entrance was round and lined with stone, sloping away into utter blackness. I led the way, all my senses alert for a WindClan patrol. The sound of trickling

water echoed around us. As the tunnel leveled out, I pricked my ears. The damp air smelled rank and bitter. Here the road fumes mingled with the fear-scent of WindClan cats.

It was too dark to see anything, but after a few paces, Midnight sensed a turning in the tunnel. Fireheart flicked his hand, touching Graystripe's shoulder lightly. I couldn't see either of my friends in the blackness, but Graystripe must have felt the signal because he stopped beside Fireheart and together we peered around the corner. Ahead of us, the tunnel was lit by a narrow hole in the ceiling that led to the wasteland above.

I could see many cats huddled together in the gray light—warriors and elders, queens and kits, all pitifully thin. A cold breeze blew relentlessly through the hole in the roof, stirring the thin fur on the skinny bodies. I shuddered, for the breeze carried the stench of sickness and crowfood.

Suddenly the tunnel shook as a car roared overhead. Graystripe, Fireheart, and I, already tense, jumped, but the WindClan cats didn't react. They simply huddled with half-closed eyes, numb to their surroundings. The noise died away. I took a deep breath and nudged Midnight around the corner, out into the thin light.

A gray WindClan tom spun around, his fur standing on end as he yowled an alarm to the rest of the Clan. In one smooth movement, the WindClan warriors shifted into human forms and formed a line across the tunnel in front of the queens and elders, teeth bared and daggers out. With a feeling of dread, I saw the glint of daggers and thorn-sharp fangs. These half-starved people were about to attack.

WindClan found

Chapter 6
"***If you're not careful you can spend your whole life looking for what you've lost***."
— Moïra Fowley-Doyle

[image]

♛♛♛

Fireheart pressed his horse warningly against Graystripe's horse, who had padded out to join him. We had to show no threat if we were to survive. The WindClan warriors stood their ground without moving a muscle.

They're waiting for a signal from their leader! I realized. They still follow the warrior code, even though they have to live like this.

From behind the line of warriors, a *very* tall man with black hair with white streaks weaved his way to the front. This must be Tallstar, leader of WindClan. Tallstar sniffed the air, but Fireheart, Graystripe, and I were downwind, our scents carried away by the steady breeze. As the black-and-white-haired man walked toward us, I breathed in the rank odor of crowfood that hung on his clothes. Like Graystripe, I remained perfectly still, my eyes down, as Tallstar circled them, sniffing their us closely. Even inspecting our horses.

Finally, Tallstar returned to his warriors.

I heard him murmur, "ThunderClan."

The warriors put down their knives, but remained in a defensive line, shielding the rest of the people. Tallstar turned to face us and crossed his elbows.

"I was expecting ShadowClan," he growled. His eyes burned with hostility. "Why are you here?"

"We came to find you," I murmured, nudging Midnight forward. "Bluestar and the other clan leaders want you to return to your home."

The WindClan leader's voice was still wary. "That land is not safe for my Clan anymore,"
he said. A haunted look in Tallstar's eye sent a pang of sorrow through me.

"ShadowClan has driven out Brokenstar," Fireheart reassured. "He is no longer a threat."

The warriors behind Tallstar turned and looked at one another. Murmurs of surprise rippled back through the Clan.

"You must return as soon as possible," I urged. "ShadowClan and RiverClan are starting to hunt the uplands. We saw a RiverClan hunting patrol near the old badger set while we were on our way here."

Tallstar growled angrily.

"But they are poor rabbit hunters," Graystripe added. "I think they went home with empty bellies."

Tallstar and his warriors chuckled with satisfaction. Their good spirits encouraged us but I could see how weak they were. This Clan would find the journey back to the uplands long and hard.

"May we travel with you?" Fireheart suggested respectfully. Tallstar's eyes flashed. I knew the question was a tactful offer of help. He looked steadily at us.

"Yes," he replied at last. "Thank you."

"This is Graystripe," Fireheart smiled, waving his hand towards Graystripe.

"This is-" I threw him a playful glare and cut him off.

"Blazefur." I gave Tallstar a small smile and leaned down to shake his hand.

"...And I am Fireheart. We are warriors of ThunderClan." Fireheart finished.

"Fireheart, Blazefur, and Graystripe..." repeated Tallstar thoughtfully. Sunlight was flooding through the gap in the roof now, making our hair glow in the dim tunnel. Graystripe's just looked like a rock.

"The names suit you all."

Another car roared overhead. We all flinched. Tallstar looked at us with amusement and flicked his hand. It must have been a signal, for the line of warriors behind him split up.

"We shall leave at once," he announced, turning around. "Are we all fit for the journey?"

Tallstar asked as the warriors began to move among the queens and elders.

"All except Morningflower's kit," replied a brown-haired warrior. "He is too young."

"Then we must take turns carrying him," answered Tallstar. The WindClan people shuffled forward, their eyes dull with pain and exhaustion. A queen was cradling a tiny baby gently. The little baby's eyes were hardly open. I smiled lightly. Maybe I could help carry him.

"Ready?" called Tallstar. A man with a deformed leg looked around the Clan and answered for them.

"Ready," he nodded.

We turned and made our way back to the tunnel entrance and waited while the WindClan people emerged blinking into the daylight. Some elders blinked so long, their faces screwed up against the weak sun, that I guessed they had not been outside the tunnel for some time. Tallstarpadded out of the tunnel last of all and walked to the head of his Clan.

"Shall we take you back the way we came?" Fireheart asked him. "I believe it's a shortcut."

"Is it safe?" asked Tallstar. I saw the caution in his eyes.

"We met no trouble coming here," Graystripe said.

"Good," he declared. "You come with me, Graystripe. Show me the way. Fireheart, travel beside the Clan. Tell my deputy if you see trouble. Blazefur, bring up the rear and make sure everybody stays together."

I nod and nudge my horse to the back. I followed up the rear just as Tallstar said and ensured everybody was okay. We walked on. As the Clan made their way under the Thunderpath arch, I could still smell the fire, but when we padded out onto the patch of wasteland, the humans were nowhere to be seen. Graystripe headed straight for the tunnel where we had spent the night near.

The front emerged to find the WindClan people staring across the field that led to the final road. I saw Tallstar consult briefly with Graystripe before they set off into the long, frost-crisp grass. Fireheart walked beside the rest of the Clan, flanking one side while Deadfoot limped steadily on the other. Before we were halfway across the field, it was clear that many of the people were having trouble keeping up the pace.

"Tallstar!" yowled Deadfoot. "We need to travel more slowly!"

I hopped off my horse and urged Morningflower onto Midnight. She gave me a skeptical look and brought her baby close to her chest. Fireheart pulled his horse beside Morningflower and me.

"Are you okay?" he asked tentatively. He looked at Morningflower

when he said it, but I knew who it was directed to.

I nodded and gave Morningflower an assuring smile. She handed the weary baby over to me and I helped her hop on Midnight. I walk close to the black horse while keeping the baby huddled to my chest.

Tallstar slowed the pace, but only a little. In spite of his obvious exhaustion and the fact that every rib showed under his fur, he burned with a fierce energy that lent swiftness to his paws. Fireheart and I could understand part of the reason for his urgency. The sun was steadily climbing above the horizon. Some of the WindClan people were sick, some old, and all of them were weak from hunger. If we were going to cross the road without losing anybody, we would have to do it quickly, before the cars came in their swarms.

Morningflower glanced between me, the baby, and Fireheart. "Do you have somebody waiting for you at home?" She asked suggestively.

I look over to Fireheart cautiously, knowing he was listening in on the conversation.

I mean, my inner-cat seemed to purr, *it's nothing he doesn't already know.*

I hiss at her as a warning.

"Yes, I do." I look behind me with a smile.

"And do you perhaps have a little one waiting for you as well?" This question was the one that almost made me drop the baby boy.

Fireheart coughed violently and I could almost hear the words 'Mother hen' at me. He gave me a bright smile while apologizing about something in his throat. If I could stomp on his foot, I would.

I grit my teeth and look back at her. "No, but I wish to one day. Right now it seems I'm taking care of *grown* children instead of my own children."

Fireheart hums as if he's approving my statement. I glare at him not bothering to hide the fact that I called him a child. Though, it seems Tigerclaw is one too. And Graystripe. And Whitestorm if he's really feeling like a child. And Darkstripe if you count the time he got flat-out drunk and tried to play dress up with a bunch of blankets like it was a doll. We don't talk about that.

When Fireheart, Morningflower, and I arrived at the hedge, WindClan was gathered around its leader.

"We cross the Thunderpath here," Tallstar announced above the noise of a monster racing past.

The WindClan leader squeezed under the hedge. Deadfoot, Graystripe, and a younger warrior followed him. Morningflower hopped off Midnight and took hold of her baby. She had stopped panting now, and as she took the baby from me she gave me a side hug gratefully. I gave her a small smile and got back on Midnight. Tallstar and Deadfoot sat staring wordlessly at the wide gray path. Graystripe stood beside them. I watched them from afar as I help the last of the members catch up to their clan.

A car sped past and Midnight threw her head up. I look towards Fireheart and Graystripe and find them with Tallstar and another warrior whose name I don't know. Fireheart glanced at me and tilted his head. I nodded and nudged Midnight forward.

"...get the Clan over in small groups," Tallstar shouted above the roaring cars.

"Graystripe and I will stay with any that need help." Fireheart nodded at Tallstar. "If you agree, Tallstar," he added.

I speak up quickly. "I can go with the strongest group first and make sure that everybody else crosses safely."

Tallstar nodded to both me and Fireheart.

"The strongest group will go first," he said to me.

The other WindClan people began to appear through the hedge. Before long the whole Clan was clustered beside us, pressed against

the sharp twigs, as far back from the Thunderpath as possible. Fireheart and Graystripe moved to the edge, watching for a break in the line of monsters. I perched myself with the first group and learned the brown-haired warrior was Onewhisker.

I worried for the last couple of groups. The road was much busier than it had been when we'd crossed last night. Onewhisker and I led the first group forward.

One glance was all it took to know that Onewhisker had not been a warrior for long. I could smell his fear in waves.

"It'll be alright," I shouted against the howling wind, "Midnight, and I will take the side where the cars are coming from!"

He nodded and gave me a small smile.

"Just think of home, right?" he asked.

"Just think of home," I echo.

Home. Mom and Dad sitting on the couch as Lily, Zach, and I sit on the floor eating popcorn on Friday nights. Camping in the backyard. Learning how to fight with Mom. Lily asking me to help her with her homework. Goofing around with Rusty at the firepit roasting marshmallows.

Home. Training as an apprentice with Lionheart, Tigerclaw, and Bluestar. Earning my warrior name. Spending time with Graystripe, Ravenpaw, Fireheart, and Lilypaw. Coming back to camp from a late-night patrol.

Home.

All was quiet, and we dashed safely over to the other side. Fireheart called out the times when the next groups could cross. I made sure to keep my leg on Midnight in case I needed to go back. We had some trouble when the next group crossed but they made it safely. It was just the last group that I worried about.

Morningflower had her baby bundled up and Fireheart offered to hold the small boy. She drew back and looked at I'm in the eyes and

I knew. If they were going to die, they would go together.

After a few complications trying to cross, all of them made it safely. Fireheart almost got run over and my heart dropped for a second but he made it out okay. Tallstar bounded across with Deadfoot and gathered his trembling Clan around him on the verge.

Onewhisker came up to me and Fireheart and thanked us.

"You would have died for us," he murmured. "WindClan will never forget that."

Tallstar's voice sounded behind us.

"Onewhisker is right; we shall honor you all in our stories. We must keep going," he continued. "We have a long journey ahead of us." As the people prepared to move off, Fireheart and I trotted over to Morningflower. She was busy rocking him to sleep.

"Is he all right?" Fireheart asked.

"Oh, yes," answered Morningflower.

"What about you?" I ask softly. Morningflower didn't answer. I understood what she had gone through. A mother's love is very strong. Fireheart turned to another queen, who answered our unspoken question.

"Don't worry," she said softly. "I'll take the baby next."

Me and Fireheart nodded and we were back at the front. As we walk there, Fireheart speaks up.

"So, are you going to tell ThunderClan about you and Tigerclaw? Assuming that you guys are a thing, right?" I could he was staring at me, but I couldn't bring myself to look at him.

"No." I didn't want to talk about it. Not with Fireheart. Not here, in this condition.

"Why?" he asked slowly then added, "If you don't mind me asking,"

I sigh softly. "Because there's too much going on right now. We can't have so many eyes watching us. Especially with Brokenstar on the loose. His goons too. It's too much of a risk."

Fireheart nodded but I don't think he understood. I smirk.

"You don't understand that, do you?" I ask with a grin.

Fireheart chuckles, "No, I don't."

"You don't have to," I murmur.

"I know," He murmurs back. "But a part of me wants to. I just don't know how,"

I finally glance over and I give him a smile. "You will one day."

He smiles back and I feel at peace. I hope that after this conversation that he and Tigerclaw will finally get along. But that's just hope. I turned back to the clan and we silently walked with each other.

The Clan followed the hedgerow along the road before turning away to join the track through the woods. The scents here seemed to soothe the WindClan people, but the journey had taken its toll; we were traveling slower than ever. I could see the strength drain from Fireheart's eyes as he helped the last people over the fence.

The sun had passed its highest point by the time we spotted the Twolegplace in the distance. I thought of Lilypaw, waiting back home. I swallowed back the lump in my throat as I thought of all of them. Dad, Lilypaw, Bluestar, Whitestorm, Tigerclaw, but mostly Mom. Fighting so much against the sickness that spread through her body. Unable to see me at all.

StarClan, give her strength, I prayed silently, *give me strength.*

Clouds billowed up over Highstones, growing blacker as they covered the sinking sun.

A cold wind ruffled the people's hair, bringing the first drops of rain. Fireheart and I looked at the WindClan people. Some had

already shifted into their cat forms, no doubt, to keep their clothes from getting wet. There was no way we could travel through a long, wet night. Especially with Yellowfang's herbs wearing off. One glance at Fireheart and Graystripe told me how tired all of us were.

"Tallstar," I called. "Maybe we should stop soon and shelter for the night?"

The WindClan leader stopped and waited while I caught up with him. The leader was already in his cat form, ears flattened against the wind and rain. He had long limbs and tail, with ribs sticking out of his wet fur. I felt a wave of sympathy crash into me. This is what ShadowClan did to them.

"I agree," he meowed. "There's a ditch here; we can shelter in that until sunrise."

Graystripe, Fireheart, and I exchanged glances.

"We might be better sheltering in the hedgerow," Fireheartsuggested. "There are rats in these ditches."

Tallstar nodded. "Very well."

He turned to his Clan and announced that they would be spending the night here. The queens and elders flopped down at once, despite the rain, while the warriors and apprentices gathered to discuss hunting patrols.

We joined them.

"I don't know how good the hunting will be here," Fireheart shouted over the wind. "There are too many humans."

Graystripe's stomach growled as if in agreement. The other warriors turned to him with amused but sympathetic eyes. Then they froze as the grass behind them rustled. The WindClan warriors bristled and arched their backs, unsheathing sharp claws, but Fireheart, Graystripe, and I turned our heads joyfully.

The wind carried a scent as familiar as our own cabin.

"Ravenpaw!" I squealed as a sleek black cat emerged from the long grass. Ravenpaw formed into his human form to greet me.

I laughed joyfully as he picked me up and swung me in his arms. Surprisingly, this wasn't the skinny, lanky boy we once knew. He looked well fed, well rested, and had some muscles protruding from his shirt.

I bet Lilypaw would like that, I chuckle inwardly.

Somewhere in my mind, my inner-cat seemed to agree.

"Thank StarClan you're safe!" Fireheart smiled.

He stepped forward to give him a man hug. They slapped each others back three times before stepping away. Graystripe gave him a man hug too.

"Firepaw!" Ravenpaw smiled in delight.

"Fireheart," I corrected him.

"We're warriors now! I'm Graystripe."

I was about to give Ravenpaw my warrior name but Deadfoot made me stop in my tracks.

"Do you know this person?" snarled Deadfoot.

The hostility in his voice made me wince. I looked at the bristling WindClan cats and silently cursed myself for calling Ravenpaw's name out loud. If WindClan mentioned it at a Gathering, it would spread through the Clans like a forest fire. Ravenpaw was supposed to be dead!

Tigerc-, my inner cat started, but I wouldn't let her finish.

I couldn't think about what Tigerclaw would say. What he would do. I shivered at the thought.

"Is he a loner?" asked Onewhisker.

"He can help us find food," Fireheart said quickly, glancing at Ravenpaw.

He nodded quickly.

"I know all the best places to hunt around here!" he said. He didn't even quiver under the hostile gazes that were thrown at him.

He's changed a lot! Fireheart said through the mind link. I agreed with him.

"Why would a loner help us?" demanded Deadfoot.

"Loners have helped us before," Graystripe told him. "Another loner once saved us from a rat attack near here."

Ravenpaw stepped forward and bent his head respectfully as he addressed the WindClan warriors. "Let me help you! I owe my life to Fireheart, Graystripe, and Blazfur, and if they're traveling with you, then you must be friends."

He lifted his eyes and let his gaze rest on the WindClan cats. They returned his stare, wearier now than hostile. The rain was falling harder and, with their fur bedraggled, they looked skinnier than ever."

I'll go and find Barley," Ravenpaw said to us. "He will help, too." He turned and disappeared through the long grass.

Tallstar's eyes burned with curiosity, but all he asked me was, "Can we trust him?"

I met Tallstar's gaze. "Completely."

Tallstar nodded to his warriors. They let the fur lie flat on their shoulders and settled down to wait. Meanwhile, we made sure our horses followed us and we transformed into our cat forms.

All of us were almost wet through our skin when Ravenpaw appeared again. This time Barley was with him. We greeted him with a smile. It was good to see him again.

Barley took one look at the dripping cats and meowed, "We need to find you some proper shelter. Follow me!" Fireheart and I leaped forward at once, glad to move our stiffening legs.

Graystripe was right behind us, but the WindClan cats hung back, fear and suspicion showing in their eyes.Tallstar blinked at his Clan.

"We have to trust him," he growled, before turning to follow the loner.

One by one, the WindClan cats fell in step behind their leader. Barley and Ravenpaw led us through the hedge into another field. In an overgrown corner, among the brambles and nettles, stood an abandoned human home. The walls were full of holes where stones had fallen out, and only half the roof was left. The WindClan cats stared fearfully at it.

"You won't get me in there!" muttered one of the elders.

"Humans never come here now," Barley reassured them.

"It'll give us some shelter from the rain," urged Fireheart.

One of the apprentices whispered loudly, "I'm not surprised he wants to hide in a human nest—once a human, always a human."

Both me andFireheart bristled. We hadn't heard that insult for several moons. But the story that two humans had joined a Clan must have made rich gossip at any Gathering. Of course, WindClan would know. I fought back frustration and anger.

I whipped around and glared at the apprentice. "You've spent two moons living in a Human tunnel. Does that make you a rat?"

The WindClan apprentice drew himself up, ruffling out his fur, but Graystripe stepped between us.

"Come on; we're just getting wetter the longer we stand out here." Tallstar meowed, "We've faced worse than a Twoleg shelter these past moons. One night here will do no harm."

The WindClan cats murmured nervously among themselves, clearly reluctant, but with a glance at me and Fireheart, Morningflower picked up her kit and padded into the Twoleg shelter. The gray queen followed after her, nudging her own kit forward out of the rain. The other cats gradually followed until every cat was inside. I looked around the gloomy shelter. The ground was bare except for patches where weeds had burrowed their way under the stone walls. The wind and rain found their way through the gaps in the walls and roof, but it was drier and more sheltered than anywhere outside.

I watched the WindClan cats sniffing cautiously around. As they began to settle themselves away from the dripping holes and drafty cracks, I glanced at Graystripe, relieved. Only Tallstar and Deadfoot remained on their paws.

"What about food?" asked Deadfoot.

Barley spoke. "You should all be resting," he meowed. "Raven–"

Fireheart interrupted him before Barley could finish saying Ravenpaw's name out loud. "Why don't you two show me, Graystripe, and Blazefur the best places to hunt around here?"

"Deadfoot and Onewhisker will go with you," meowed Tallstar. I couldn't decide if theWindClan leader still didn't trust these two strangers, or if he was determined to show that his Clan could look after itself. The six of us ventured back out into the rain. Hunting would be hard, but I was starving. Hunger always made me a better hunter. Tonight the voles and mice wouldn't stand a chance.

"Just show me where they are!" I meowed to Barley and Ravenpaw.

The two cats led us into a small patch of woodland. I breathed in a lungful of the familiar scent. Then I dropped into a hunting crouch and began to stalk into the ferns.

When the hunting party returned, each of us carried a mouthful of fresh-kill. The WindClan cats shared a feast with their new allies that night. Every cat from the eldest to the youngest ate their fill, then curled up together to share tongues in mutual grooming, while

outside the wind and rain lashed at the walls of the shelter.

As darkness settled in, Barley got to his paws. "I'm off. Rats to catch!" he meowed.

Fireheart and I stood and touched the loner's nose with our own.

"Thank you again," Fireheart purred.

"This is the second time you've helped us," I add gratefully.

"Thanks for sending Ravenpaw to me," replied Barley. "He's turning into a fine ratter. And it's good to share a meal with a fellow cat from time to time."

"Is he happy here?" I asked curiously.

"Ask him yourself," meowed Barley, and with that he turned and disappeared into the night.

I watched Fireheart walk over to Tallstar. I couldn't hear them directly but Fireheart was talking about staying up to watch. He flicked his head towards us. They exchanged a few more words and then Fireheart glanced at us.

We bounded over to his side as soon as he called us. Fireheart led us to a corner of the human nest, close enough to the entrance for them to keep watch, but far enough away from the other cats that we could talk in private.

"So what happened after we left you?" he asked Ravenpaw as soon as the four of us had settled down.

"I headed straight across the WindClan territory like you suggested."

"What about the Humans' dogs?" Graystripe put in. "Were they loose?"

"Yes, but it was easy to avoid them," Ravenpaw told him.

Fireheart, Graystripe and I were surprised by how casually our

friend dismissed the dogs.

"Easy?" we echoed.

"I could smell them from a long way off. I just waited until dawn, and once the dogs were tied up again,I tracked down Barley. He's been great. I think he likes having me around." Ravenpaw's expression suddenlyclouded. "Which is more than Tigerclaw ever did," he meowed bitterly.

I glanced down at my paws and flattened my ears. Graysripe shuffled his paws nervously. Fireheart lashed his tail. So much for peace about Tigerclaw. Ravenpaw noticed our uneasiness but we quickly covered it up. We would tell him later. *I* would tell him later.

"What did you tell him?"

I recognized the hunted look in Ravenpaw's eyes as he spoke about his old mentor.

"We saidyou'd been killed by a ShadowClan patrol," I answered quietly.

I opened my mouth to speak about the situation with me and him but two WindClan apprentices were wanderingtoward us. I twitched my ears to warn my friends that we had an audience.

"Oh, yes," meowed Ravenpaw, raising his voice. "We loners eat Clan apprentices whenever we can catch one."

The WindClan apprentices shot him a scornful look. "You don't scare us," one mewed.

"Really?" purred Ravenpaw. "Well, I guess your meat would be tough and stringy, anyway."

"How come you're such good friends with a loner?" one apprentice asked Fireheart.

"A wise warrior makes friends wherever he can," Fireheart replied. "If it weren't for this loner, we'dstill be cold and hungry instead of

dry and well-fed!" He narrowed his eyes in warning and the apprenticesslunk away.

"So ThunderClan thinks I'm dead," meowed Ravenpaw when they had gone. He gazed down at hispaws. "Well, it's probably for the best."

He lifted his eyes and looked at us. "I'm gladI've seen you again," he meowed warmly. "Oh! And how's Lilypaw? Is she still an apprentice?"

I chuckle, "Lilypaw is doing fine. She misses you dearly."

Ravenpaw purred and shuffled his paws. Fireheart purred, and Graystripe prodded his friend affectionately with a hind paw. I leaned forward and gave him a wet lick right on his ear. He groaned and pawed me away.

"Well, you look tired," Ravenpaw continued, "You should get some sleep. I'll keep watchtonight. I can rest tomorrow."

He stood up and gently licked each of us on the head. Then hepadded to the entrance of the shelter, sat down, and stared out into the rain. I felt guilty not telling him more about me and Tigerclaw but I just couldn't bear it. Fireheart seemed to read my thought.

You need to tell him before it's too late, Fireheart warned.

I can't Fireheart, you know that, I shoot back.

Firheart sighed and glanced at me. *Just try.*

I don't respond.

When I woke, Ravenpaw was gone. It was past dawn. The gray rain clouds had begun to driftaway. Tinged by the rosy glow of the rising sun, they looked like blossoms floating across a pond. I stared through a gap in the roof and watched them as the WindClan cats stirred and helped themselves to theleftovers of last night's catch.A short-tailed brown tom joined me and gazed up at the clouds with me. I jumped back as the brown cat began to yowl.

The noise brought the other WindClan cats crowdingaround us, murmuring and anxious.

"What is it, Barkface?" prompted Morningflower. "Has StarClan spoken to you?"

I realized thatthis tom must be WindClan's medicine cat. I tensed instinctively at the sight of Barkface's bristling fur.

"The clouds are stained with blood!" rasped Barkface, his eyes wide and glazed. "It is a sign from ourancestors. There is trouble ahead. This day shall bring an unnecessary death!"

A/N

That took way longer than I expected it would! I'm so sorry for all the delay, It's the end of the school year and with SOL's and other stuff I got really busy pretty quick. I promise I'll try and update more frequently! Thanks so much for reading!

Windclan home

Chapter 7
"***Home is the starting place of love*, *hope and dreams***."
-Anonymous

[image]

♛♛♛

For a moment, none of the cats moved or spoke.

Then Deadfoot growled, "Any of the Clans could see thoseclouds. We can't be sure that the message is for us."

Hopeful mews spread through WindClan however, I couldn't shake the feeling that something would go wrong.

Tallstar surveyed his Clan, then meowed calmly, "WhateverStarClan has planned for us, today we return to our home. I can smell more rain in the air. It's time we setoff."

The last thing they needed was hysteria at anominous prophecy.Tallstar led the way out into the chilly morning air. Fireheart, Graystripe, and I followed. The WindClanleader was right: the wind carried the promise of more rain, and soon.

"Shall we scout ahead?" Fireheart offered.

"Yes, please," replied Tallstar. "Let me know if you see dogs, Twolegs, or rats. My Clan is stronger thismorning, but we had trouble with dogs on the way out. We must stay alert."

I could see from theworried look in the leader's eyes that Barkface's warning had disturbed him more than his confident wordssuggested. His Clan might be stronger, but it was in no state to fight off attackers.Fireheart raced away with me and Graystripe at his heels. We took turns going back to the Clan, tellingTallstar

that the way ahead was clear, or warning him to stay back while a Twoleg passed by with a dog. TheWindClan cats wordlessly obeyed their leader, plodding on heavy paws despite their night's rest.By sunhigh dark clouds had gathered once more, and the first drops of rain were beginning to fall. Theground began to slope upward, and when we pushed our way through a hedge, I recognized the reddirt track that led away from human territory and into WindClan's hunting grounds.

My spirits soared, and I met Graystripe's gaze with a look of triumph. Nearly there!The muffled tramp of pawsteps sounded behind the hedge. I spun around and darted back intothe field. The WindClan cats had caught up with us. Deadfoot was at the head of the group. He lookedstartled by my sudden appearance.

"This way," I meowed, showing him the gap through the dripping leaves. I was eager to seeWindClan's reaction when they glimpsed the uplands on the other side. With Deadfoot leading, the catsbegan to file slowly through. I followed close behind the last cat, but Deadfoot and two warriors had already leaped the ditchand crossed the track, and were pushing into the hedgerow on the other side. Their pace had quickened—they knew where they were. I had to sprint to catch up. I followed them through the hedge andkept up with them as they bounded toward the long slope that led to the uplands, and their home.

At the foot of the slope, Deadfoot and his warriors paused to wait for the rest of the Clan. They closedtheir eyes against the rain but held their heads high. I could see their chests rising and falling as theybreathed in the familiar scents sweeping from the uplands. I ran back to the rest of the Clan, looking for Morningflower. I spotted her walking beside atabby warrior who held her kit in his mouth. Every few steps the tortoiseshell queen stretched her head tosniff the wet little bundle. It would not be long now before she could settle her kit into the WindClan nursery.

I fell into step beside Graystripe and Fireheart at the rear. We glanced happily at each other but didn't speak, too caught up in WindClan's excitement at coming home. Even the elders were moving swiftly now,keeping their bodies low and their eyes narrowed against the rain. As the Clan joined Deadfoot at the foot

ofthe slope, the deputy got to his paws and Tallstar took the lead. Without pausing, Tallstar began to follow anarrow sheep trail through the rough grass and heather.As the Clan neared the top, some of the warriors raced ahead again. At the brow of the hill, they madeproud silhouettes against the stormy sky, while the wind sent ripples through their fur. Ahead stretched theirold hunting grounds. Suddenly two apprentices charged past me and bounded away into the familiarheather.

Tallstar stiffened. "Wait!" he yowled. "There might be hunting parties from the other Clans here!"

As soon as they heard him, the apprentices skidded to a halt and pelted back to join the Clan, their eyesstill bright with exhilaration.From a rock-strewn ridge, I saw the dip in the ground that concealed WindClan's camp. With apurr of delight, Morningflower took her kit from the mouth of the tabby warrior and hurried toward thehollow. Tallstar flicked his tail and three warriors raced forward to escort her as she disappeared over theedge and down into the camp.The WindClan leader paused while the rest of his Clan rushed into the sheltering bushes below.

Heturned to us, his eyes shining. "My Clan is grateful for your help," he meowed. "You three have proved you are warriors worthy of StarClan. WindClan has come home, and it is time for you toreturn to yours." I felt a pang of disappointment. I'd wanted to see Morningflower settled in the nursery withher kit. But Tallstar was right: there was no need for us to stay here any longer.

Tallstar spoke again. "There may be hostile hunting parties around. Onewhisker and Deadfoot will escort you to Fourtrees." Fireheart bowed his head.

"Thank you, Tallstar."

Tallstar called to his warriors and gave them their orders. Then he turned his tired eyes once more to Fireheart. "You have served WindClan well. Tell Bluestar that WindClan will not forget it was ThunderClan who brought them home."

We all transformed into our human forms and grabbed our horses.

Deadfoot padded away in the direction of Fourtrees. Fireheart and Graystripe walked after him with Onewhisker at their side. We stayed close together as they followed a narrow path through a solid mass of gorse that provided good shelter against the rain.

A weary coldness was beginning to nag at my bones, and my feet felt sore. If Fireheart, Graystripe, and I followed the route to come, past Fourtrees, we still had a long way to go.

Fireheart looked around at his companions and said tentatively, "You know, it'd be quicker if we followed the river." Graystripe looked up from scraping mud off his shoe.

Weirdo, I rolled my eyes.

"But that would mean crossing into RiverClan territory," I say.

"We could follow the gorge," Fireheart explained. "RiverClan doesn't hunt there; it's too steep for them to get down to the river."

"I don't think that's a good idea. What if we get caught by a RiverClan patrol?" I butt in.

"We're all tired. And all the clans agreed to us crossing their territory. I'm sure we'll be fine." Fireheart insisted.

"I wouldn't mind taking a shorter route." Graystripe turned his yellow eyes hopefully to the WindClan deputy.

Deadfoot looked thoughtful. "Tallstar ordered us to travel with you to Fourtrees," he said.

"If you don't want to come with us, we'll understand," Fireheart answered quickly. "We'll only be in RiverClan territory for a blink. I can't see us meeting any trouble."

Oh boy.

Graystripe nodded, but Deadfoot shook his head. "We couldn't let you go into RiverClan territory alone," he said. "You're exhausted. If you do meet trouble, you're in no state to deal with it."

"We won't meet anyone!" Fireheart had convinced everyone and seemed determined to convince Deadfoot too.

Great.

Deadfoot gazed at him with wise old eyes. "If we did go that way," he mused, "it would let RiverClan know that WindClan is back."

Fireheart smiled in understanding. "And once they've smelled fresh WindClan scent, they might not be so keen to come rabbit hunting in your territory again."

I sighed. They didn't even ask me if I agreed. Oh, well. If we get killed, I'm blaming it on them.

"Then we're going through RiverClan territory?" Fireheart asked.

"Yes," decided Deadfoot. He changed direction and led us along an old badger trail that took us away from the barren uplands. Soon we were in RiverClan's territory. Even through the wind and the rain, I could hear the roaring of the river as it crashed and thundered somewhere up ahead.

I could hear my heart pounding against my ears, right then and there I knew something was going to go wrong. The rain soaked through my clothes making me cold. My hair stuck to my face and neck. Since my hair was wet, it looked like maroon or dark red.

We followed the trail toward the noise. The path shrank until it was little more than a narrow strip of grass on the very edge of a deep gorge. On one side the land stretched upward, steep and rocky; on the other, it plunged straight down. I could see the far side of the gorge only a few yards away. The space looked tantalizingly narrow, and I wondered if I could leap the gap. Perhaps if I weren't so tired and hungry... My feet prickled with fear at the thought of falling, but I couldn't resist peering over the side.

Beneath my feet, the ground dropped away on a sheer cliff. Ferns clung to tiny ledges, their leaves glistening, not from rain, but from the spray of the swollen torrent that foamed at the bottom of the gorge. Since I had a fear of heights, I turned towards the rocky wall

and vomited the scraps of my last meal. I rested my hand on a rock and tried to catch my breath. Onewhisker put a hand on my back and made sure I was okay.

I wiped my mouth and whispered my thanks before moving on. Ahead of me, Deadfoot, Fireheart, and Graystripe plodded steadily on, heads down. They would have to follow this path until they could cut away from it, through the small strip of forest that stood between them and ThunderClan territory. I stumbled as I hurried to catch up. Deadfoot's face was grim; his mouth a straight line. Onewhisker was nervous too; he kept looking sharply up the slope beside us as if he could hear something. I tried to strain my ears but was only met with the roaring of the river. I glanced anxiously over my shoulder, my eyes darting from side to side. The WindClan members' wariness was making me uneasy.

The steep slope began to flatten out until they could move farther away from the cliff edge. The rain was still driving into our faces, and the darkening sky told me that the sun was setting, but it would not be long now before we reached the forest. There would be more shelter there. The thought of food and a dry bed cheered me.

I got my bow out. I pulled an arrow out of my quiver and brought my bow up, scanning the area. Everybody was tense. Graystripe and Onewhisker got out knives while Fireheart and Deadfoot clenched their fists. A warning growl came from Deadfoot's throat. RiverClan patrol! I pulled back on my arrow and let go, sending it flying into someone's thigh.

Tigerclaw! I need you! Please just help! I begged through the mind link. I'm thankful I got an immediate response.

Where are you? I hear yelling and fighting. Are you there?

I practically cried at the sound of his voice.

Yes. Please come quickly. RiverClan isn't too happy right now.

Anything for you darling.

I was so distracted talking to Tigerclaw that I hadn't noticed the

fighting around me. I shrieked as I felt a knife dig deep into my back. I got my sword out and we started to fight. The metal clanked against each other and I got a good look at my opponent. Leopardfur. "This will be the last time you set foot in RiverClan territory," hissed Leapordfur.

"I think I learned that already!" Deciding to make the next move, I stabbed my elbow in her ribs, hooked my leg around hers, and pulled hard.

She fell to the ground with an 'Uhhh' and then ran away to the next person. I knew we were in no shape to fight, especially since my last meal was on the outside, not the inside. My companions were fighting fiercely but we were no match for a whole RiverClan patrol. Through my wet clothes, I could see the bloodstain where my wound was. I was getting weaker since I lost a lot of blood and soon, I would faint from exhaustion.

Come on Tigerclaw! My inner-cat hisses.

I'm coming! I jumped when I heard his response.

Then, from the forest behind us, another sound reached my ears. It was full of fury—yet it filled me with a surge of hope. Tigerclaw's war cry! I smelled the fast-approaching ThunderClan patrol—Tigerclaw, Willowpelt, Whitestorm, and Sandpaw. Yowling and spitting, the ThunderClan people leaped into the fray.

I felt somebody push me into the muddy ground. I couldn't recognize him but he was the most stupid guy I'd ever met. I kicked him in the manhood, and he rolled over and groaned. I swung my leg around the other side of his hip and punched him square in the face. We rolled over and over until we were at the edge of the gorge.

I screamed as he and I were pushed over the edge. I tried to get a good hold but all of it was muddy. I grew my claws and bared my sharpened teeth as I desperately tried to hold on. He clung to my leg like a tick. Either he was trying to hold on or he was trying to pull me down. I tried kicking him off but there was no use. I was going to die. My hand slipped and I shrieked. Suddenly I wasn't

falling anymore. Was I in StarClan?

I opened my eyes in shock. "Tigerclaw?"

"Hey, Wormkit," he murmured.

"But how?" I ask. He would've never had time to save me.

"I heard you scream just before you fell. I had time to attach the rope to my carabiner so I could save you," he presses his hand on my hip to support me.

"Thank you," I say quietly, winding my legs around his waist.

"You don't have to be scared anymore," He cupped my cheek.

I realized my eyes were not the normal blue, but a light blue. I was still scared because I was clutching his shoulders with my claws.

He offered me a small smile and we were propelled upward. Once we were on solid ground, I moved to get up but immediately fell as pain flared in my ankle.

That guy must've twisted it, I thought grimly.

Leopardfur lifted her head and yowled into the wind, "Whiteclaw! No!"

Graystripe stood in shock. 'I tried to grab him...he just lost his footing...I didn't mean to..." The words tumbled out breathlessly.

Leopardfur growled deep in her throat, but it was a warning to her people. They were to stay back. The RiverClan deputy stared Tigerclaw straight in the eye.

"This has gone beyond a border fight," she murmured. "We shall return to our Clan. It has become a matter to settle at another time and in a different way."

Tigerclaw defiantly returned Leopardfur's stare. He showed no fear but merely gave the smallest of nods.

She turned around and the patrol followed her.

"We should leave," says Deadfoot, limping forward. "Your three young warriors served us well, and my Clan thanks you." But the formal words of gratitude sounded hollow after the tragedy they had just witnessed.

Tigerclaw nodded, and the two WindClan warriors began to head back toward their territory. Fireheart said a quiet farewell to Onewhisker as he passed. Onewhisker glanced briefly at me and walked on.

Fireheart started toward me but Tigerclaw growled, "Follow me!"

I tried walking but I didn't get very far without tripping.

"Hold on," Tigerclaw grunts.

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. He lifted me bridle-style.

"Hey!" I protest.

"Would you rather walk and get your feet sore or would you rather me carry you?"

"Or. I'd rather go with or." I couldn't help but grin. He sighs and walks on.

I knew nothing good was going to happen at camp. We walked back to camp, numb to the bone. Cold and tired. I blamed myself for the guy's death but Tigerclaw had insisted that it was nobody's fault and that it just happened. Since I was too tired to put up with an argument, I reluctantly agreed.

I rested my head against his chest, seeking warmth. When we walked into the camp, my blood went cold as I saw Bluestar's angry eyes resting on Graystripe, Fireheart, and I. Tigerclaw set me down carefully and wrapped an arm around my waist to support me.

"You! My cabin! Now!" She growls pointing at all four of us.

With the help of Tigerclaw and Fireheart, I limped into the cabin.

My face felt hot and I thought I was going to be sick again. Bluestar looks expectantly at us. Finally, Tigerclaw spoke.

"Fireheart decided to return home through RiverClan territory," growled Tigerclaw.

Graystripe looked up for the first time. "It wasn't just Fireheart who decided—" he began.

Tigerclaw interrupted him. "They were found by a RiverClan patrol. If my patrol hadn't heard their calls in time, they wouldn't have made it home at all."

"So you rescued them," says Bluestar, relaxing. "Thank you, Tigerclaw."

"It's not that simple." Tigerclaw snorted. "They were fighting beside the gorge. A RiverClan warrior who was battling Graystripe fell over the edge. Blazefur was too close to the gorge as well. A Warrior she was battling fell over and if it weren't for me she would be dead right now." I noticed Graystripe flinch at Tigerclaw's words.

I swallowed hard. I could've died. It would've been better if I had died instead of not only one but two RiverClan warriors. Tigerclaw kept me close to him as if I was gonna run away. I mean, honestly! You would think that he was a leech.

"Wait," I stepped forward.

"Before you blame Fireheart anymore, I'm the one who suggested we could go through RiverClan," I say. I couldn't let Fireheart take all of the blame. Bluestar's eyes hardened.

"I'd expected you to know better," She narrows her eyes, "But you were tired and you didn't know what you were doing." She sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose.

"You shouldn't have been in RiverClan territory," Tigerclaw snarled. "Especially with WindClan people."

"It wasn't an alliance. They were escorting us back home!" Fireheart protested.

"RiverClan knew we were going to find WindClan and bring them back. They agreed to it at the Gathering. They shouldn't have attacked us—it was a special mission, like the journey to Highstones."

"They didn't agree to let you travel through their territory!" spat Tigerclaw. "You still don't understand Clan ways, do you?"

"He knows it well enough to have gone through apprentice training and become a warrior!" I snarled. Tigerclaw snapped his mouth shut and backed off.

As he should, my inner-cat growls.

Bluestar sighs again. 'At the same time, you did well to find WindClan and bring them back. But we will need to prepare ourselves for an attack from RiverClan. We need to start training more warriors. Fireheart, Graystripe, Blazefur, Frostfur, and Mousefur tell me three of their kids are almost ready to begin their training. I want each of you to take a kid as your apprentice.'

I gaped at her. I couldn't believe Bluestar had suggested it—especially now. I glanced furtively at Tigerclaw. The deputy sat rigid as a rock.

Graystripe raised his head. "But none of Frostfur's and Mousefur's kits are 6 moons yet!"

"It won't be long before they are. The divisions at the last Gathering troubled me, and today..." Bluestar's voice trailed off, and I noticed Graystripe looking down at his feet once more. Tigerclaw was staring at Bluestar, his amber eyes hard.

"Wouldn't it be better to ask more experienced warriors like Longtail or Darkstripe to take on another apprentice?" he asked. "These two are hardly more than apprentices themselves!" I noticed he only said two, not three.

"I did consider that," replied Bluestar. "But Longtail will be busy enough with Swiftpaw, and Darkstripe is getting Dustpaw ready to become a full warrior."

"What about Runningwind?" Tigerclaw asked.

"Runningwind is a fine hunter and a loyal warrior," Bluestar answered. "But I don't think he has the patience for mentoring. ThunderClan has better use for his skills."

"And you think these two have got what it takes to train ThunderClan warriors?" Tigerclaw says scornfully.

Fireheart flinched. Tigerclaw was eyeing him alone as he spoke.

Bluestar stared back at her deputy. "We shall find out. Don't forget, they brought WindClan home. Blazefur is my niece, so I suggest you stay quiet about her. And of course, Tigerclaw," she added, "I am relying on you to oversee the training."

Tigerclaw nodded, and Bluestar turned back to Fireheart, Graytripe, and I. "Get something to eat," she ordered. "Then rest. We'll have the naming ceremony for the kids at moonhigh."

I went to the medicine den and Yellowfang cleaned my wounds. She put a sprain on my ankle so it was better to walk. The rain had eased to a fine drizzle. Lilackit and Lilypaw were staring at the fire looking distraught. I sat beside them.

"You okay?" I ask.

"No. I'm scared. You could've died! Y-you - I-I w-was afraid-d I-I was going t-to lose you. After Ravenpaw had left... I knew I couldn't lose you," Lilypaw's eyes welled with tears and Lilackit looked at me with scared eyes.

Both of them sobbed and I pulled them into a hug.

"Pain only makes you stronger," I murmured to both of them, remembering the training sessions I had with Mom.

"Where'd you learn that?" Lilackit asks.

"My mother," I murmur, brushing some loose hair out of her face.

"She was Fawnstep right?"

"Mhm. She was the sister of Bluestar and Snowfur."

"Wow. I think it's cool to be related to the leader." Lilackit says with round eyes.

"It is very cool," I smile.

When we heard Bluestar's call Lilackit wiped her eyes. She hurried over to Brackenkit and Cinderkit and waited. Mousefur was trying to comb her hair with her hand but she kept on yanking it.

When we reached the center of the clearing, Bluestar gazed around at the assembly of people. "This moonhigh, we gathered together to name three new apprentices. Come forward, you three."

Cinderkit darted forward. Lilackit and Brackenkit trailed behind.

"From this day forward," Bluestar says, gazing down at the excited girl, "until she has earned her warrior name, this apprentice will be called Cinderpaw."

"Cinderpaw!" she couldn't help saying her new name out loud. A quietening hiss came from Frostfur, and Cinderpaw ducked her head apologetically.

"Fireheart," says Bluestar, "you are ready for your first apprentice. You will begin Cinderpaw's training." Pride swelled in my chest. "You are fortunate, Fireheart, to have had more than one mentor. I expect you to pass on everything I taught you to this young apprentice and share with her the skills you learned from Tigerclaw and Lionheart."

"And this apprentice"—Bluestar turned her gaze toward the ginger-haired boy—"will be known as Brackenpaw." Brackenpaw didn't move or make a sound.

"Graystripe, you will train Brackenpaw. Our lost friend Lionheart was your mentor. I hope that his skill and wisdom will pass through you to your new apprentice."

Lilackit looked the happiest out of all of them.

"Lilackit, you will be known as Lilacpaw. Blazefur, you are ready for an apprentice. Pass on all you know from Tigerclaw, Lionheart, and I." Cinderpaw bounded forward and collided with Fireheart making him fall over.

She said a quiet apology and they both tried to hug again. Lilacpaw hugged my torso.

"I'm so proud of you," I whisper.

"And I'm proud of *you,"* she whispers back.

I smiled and we sat down for something to eat. Everyone was buried in a conversation. Fireheart and Graystripe were joking around as usual. Lilacpaw and Swiftpaw seemed to enjoy each other's company as well. He seemed more fit and strong since he was a kid. I could hear her giggling as Swiftpaw tried to throw a piece of meat in his mouth. It ended up landing in his hair.

"You're disgusting!" Lilacpaw gasped as Swiftpaw took it out of his hair and shoved it in his mouth.

"It's not like I care!" He mumbled through a mouthful.

I was too busy drooling over Lilacpaw and Swiftpaw that I hadn't noticed Tigerclaw beside me.

I made no move. Instead, I hissed at him while looking at Lilacpaw. "What are you doing?"

"Sitting next to you," was his smart-ass reply.

I turned to look at him. "Smart ass,"

He stayed silent. *Just because we're hiding what's between us doesn't mean we have to completely ignore each other.*

I shrugged. "I guess not,"

I bit my lip to hide my smile. Tigerclaw cockily turned his head and gave me a smirk. The smirk dropped once he saw Fireheart coming.

Well, shit.

World War 3 is about to begin. Fireheart sat on my other side. "Still perving on her? That's what I thought. You know, you really can't let things go, can you?"

"Fireheart. That's enough." I snapped, giving him my only warning.

"Last time I checked, she had no interest in you," Tigerclaw snorted.

I felt Fireheart's fist curl at his side. A spike of fear went up my spine. I couldn't stand it. I need to get out of here. I stormed to the camp entrance in a hurry. I didn't plan to go to the forest but my legs took me there anyway.

I was so done with them fighting. I just needed to be alone for once. I stopped when I heard their thundering feet behind me.

I turn around abruptly, "DO YOU GUYS EVER STOP FIGHTING? I'M DONE AND I'M TIRED! WHEN WILL YOU LEARN TO GET OVER YOURSELVES? YOU ACT LIKE CHILDREN WHO THROW TEMPER TANTRUMS EVERY GODDAMN MINUTE!"

Both of them stare at me like two deer staring at headlights.

"Did you even hear me?" I throw my arms up.

Both of them nodded quickly and muttered yes. I turn around and pinch the bridge of my nose trying my best not to cry.

"Мама, почему ты не можешь быть здесь? Помоги мне, пожалуйста." I sigh. (Mom, why can't you be here? Help me please.)

"Fireheart, follow me," I hesitantly murmured.

I walk at least a couple of yards before I stop. "Fireheart, we're just friends. I know it's hard for you to hear that but I ended things a while ago. The reason I broke up with you is because of how obsessive you were being. I couldn't have that toxicity in my life. Just because Tigerclaw and I are hiding our whole relationship doesn't mean you have a public claim over me. Just go back to

camp."

After Fireheart leaves, I go back to a worried Tigerclaw. He pulled me into his arms.

"I'm so tired of this," I murmur into his shirt.

"I think I might know something that'll cool you down. Come with me," He grabbed my hand and lead me down the river. He leads me to the edge of the river where there's an opening.

"Is this-"

"Sunningrocks? Yeah. Just wait for it." He smiled and picked up a shield from under the log.

He put it down. He instructed me to sit down. He sat down behind me and wrapped his arm around my waist.

"Hold on," he whispered in my ear.

He used his other arm to push off one of the big rocks. I squealed when we slid downhill into the dark cave. Once we were down I gape at the sight in front of me. The whole cave was lit up. I stood up and laughed.

"Is this real? This-This is beautiful!"

"I've wanted to show you this for some time now. It's Bioluminescence. It's the production and emission of light by a living organism."

As the river rippled against the hard stone, little dots of neon blue began to appear. It looked like a thousand stars. It was all over the top of the cave too. A little whole was above.

"When the moon reaches its highest point the whole cave will glow more than you've ever seen. Sort of like the Moonstone. That's why I named it the Moonpool." Tigerclaw took his jacket off and laid it on the ground.

I sat down beside him. He wrapped an arm around me and kissed

my forehead gently. Butterflies erupted in my stomach. I sat and enjoyed this quiet and peaceful moment with Tigerclaw. He never said anything after that and I think he's waiting for me to say what I want to. I took this opportunity to tell him why I was so harsh with them.

"I'm sorry for yelling earlier. I was overwhelmed and it's not because of you. Fireheart's really pissing me off right now." I rested my head on his shoulder.

"It just doesn't feel right. When.... when we were dating he got obsessive over me. I got scared and told him I wasn't going to live my life with someone who was constantly watching me. He got mad and just left. He came back and said he wanted to be just friends and my naive mind said yes. Now that I'm dating you he's going back to being obsessive."

"Do you think...?"

"No, no, Tigerclaw you are not like that. You're protective but you also let me have my space. Fireheart rarely gave me any space and it freaked me out." He nodded slowly.

I looked at the water and sulked. I saw Tigerclaw watching me out of the corner of my eye. It was a dreamy look with a tiny smile on his face.

"What? Why are you staring at-" I was interrupted by a gentle kiss.

And then another. I leaned back and let Tigerclaw take over. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him as close as possible. His tongue slid across my bottom lip. His lips were soft, almost silken, and pillowy against my own. I could feel the soft tickle of his breath beneath my nose, his fingers carding through my hair as we breathed each other in. He ran a hand up my side and that's when I came to my senses. We were in a cave and it wasn't the most comfortable.

"We shouldn't do this here," I murmured against his lips.

"Then let's go back to camp," he smiled slightly.

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I changed into some nightclothes and headed upstairs to Tigerclaw's room. I pulled his jacket tighter around my arms. I opened the door slowly. He was on the other side of the room. I quickly shut the door behind me.

"Hey," I say softly.

He turned around and smiled. I made sure to keep pressure off of my foot. Speaking of my foot, I need to rewrap it and I forgot how Yellowfang showed me to do it.

"Can you help me with something?" I step farther into the room.

Tigerclaw looked a little worried, "Yeah. What do you need?"

"I need you to teach me how to wrap my foot. I forgot how it works." I shrug sheepishly.

He nodded and walked over to me.

"What are you - eeeee," I squealed when he lifted me into his arms bridal style.

He walked to the other side of the bed and set me down gently. I opened my mouth to speak but Tigerclaw silently put his finger to his lips. He knelt and grabbed my foot gently. He unwrapped it first, then began to instruct me.

"First, you wrap the bandage around the ball of your foot once, keeping it somewhat taut with a light pull," he demonstrated with a tight pull.

I winced a bit.

"Does it hurt?" He softened his grip.

"A little," I smile reassuringly.

Tigerclaw continued, "Then slowly start circling your way around the arch of the foot. Pull the bandage diagonally from the bottom of
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the toes across the foot's top and circle it around the ankle to finish it off and you're done."

"Thanks,"

"But you should keep it off at night. To let your foot rest in its regular position.... And you should stretch it... so you aren't sore when you get the good to go from Yellowfang." He started unwrapping my foot slowly.

The way his fingers glided across my skin felt like a lightning strike. Suddenly, I felt hot and sweaty and I became aware of everything that was happening in this room. Once my bandage was off, his fingertips still lingered on the soft skin of my ankles. His auburn eyes met mine and I smile softly.

He kisses me once and then, the rest of the night was soft caresses, bodies moving against one another, and murmurs of sweet nothings. All I cared about was I was in his arms again safe and where I needed to be.

A/N

As you guys have noticed by now, this book is way more mature than most Warriors books because that's how I write. The rest of the scene would've been Tigerclaw and Blazefur doing the ✧dirty✧, but since some of you guys might be a bit innocent, I will wait for one of you to comment that you want it written down cause I'm that nice. (I always get frustrated when some authors leave it on a cliffhanger and don't give me all the juicy details) SOOOOOOO, I will not leave you hanging. 😈. BUTTTTTTTTT, I will NOT be writing it in this chapter. There will be a separate chapter with a warning and everything so if people don't want to read that stuff: Move along my friends, for I have other stuff written for you! (Gotta include everybody!) That's all for now so BYEEEEEEEEEE!

Blazefur and Tigerclaw

(Just a warning before this chapter, I added this because someone asked me to and I'm nice🖤. If you don't want to read ✧˖°seggsy time✧˖°, then I suggest moving along cause I really don't want to be reported. Tanks!)

"***Where there is love***, ***there is life***."-***Mahatma Gandhi***

[image]

♛♛♛

The way his fingers glided across my skin felt like a lightning strike. Suddenly, I felt hot and sweaty and became aware of everything happening in this room. Once my bandage was off, his fingertips still lingered on the soft skin of my ankles. His auburn eyes met mine.

"Can I touch you?" his words were slow and breathy.

My throat closed and I tried swallowing it down. I just nodded. His eyes flicked between my legs and my face. I gripped the sheets below me, hoping to dry off my clammy hands. Tigerclaw pressed a light kiss on my knee. A shiver went up my spine.

He stood up and took his shirt off. I tried really hard to conceal the girly squeal that rose in my throat as I eyed his *very* muscular chest. I stood carefully and took Tigerclaw's jacket off. He lifted me up and I wrapped my legs around his waist and he walked around the bed. He kissed me soft and slow, he held me like I was a feather.

He let me go as we both knelt on the bed. He pulled me to him and I straddled his legs. I kissed him again and felt his soft feathery lips against mine.

"I missed you so much," I whispered into his lips.

He ran a hand through my hair and mumbled something that I didn't quite hear. He played with the hem of my dress, sliding it up my legs. He broke away from the kiss and started to lift my dress. I raised my arms as he took the dress off of my body. I immediately pulled him back in for another kiss, wrapping my arms around his shoulders. I shivered at the contact of the air but soon recovered as the heat of the fireplace radiated its warmth.

(Aight this is where it starts getting heavy. IF YOU CAN'T HANDLE IT LEAVE NOW OR FOREVER HOLD YOUR PEACEEE)

I felt a pit in my stomach and I could barely breathe. Maybe it was just the situation or my burning desire to have him inside of me, kissing me to no end. I trailed kisses down his jaw, smelling the smokey, woodsy smell that pulled me towards him. I felt the vibrations of his throat when he groaned and I kissed his neck more.

Tigerclaw flipped us over so I was beneath him. He unbuckled his belt and slid his pants off. I squeezed my legs together, hoping to get rid of the heat down there. Tigerclaw pressed a hand beside my head to support himself. He pressed a kiss on my breast and gently groped me. I sighed in contentment. His hair tickled my neck and I bit back a giggle. He lifted his head and kissed me slowly.

At that moment, I felt loved. I felt safe. I wanted him to wrap his arms around me and that would be enough. Having him here. That was enough. Having him close enough to breathe in his heavenly smell. *He was enough.*

He pulled away, looked at me, and brushed away any stray hairs on my face. He slid a hand down my belly and spread my legs apart. I blushed deeply and looked down at his hand. He took my chin and pushed my head up.

"Look at me, sweetheart. I'm not down there am I?" He smirked slightly and added, "Unless you want me down there,"

"I think I prefer you up here right now," I added the words 'right

now'. Maybe he would be down there soon.

He looked down to see where he was going and slid two fingers into me. I moaned and pulled him closer to me.

"Two fingers and you're already squeezing so hard sweetheart. How I am gonna fit?" He kissed my neck.

(It gets really graphic now. Read if you want, but just a warninggggg)

He pumped his fingers in and out and rubbed my clit in circular motions. I ground my hips against his fingers and thread my fingers through his hair. I close my eyes and grab his hair. I gasp, moan, and cry every time his fingers thrust in and out of me. I heard him groan above me.

"That's it, sweetheart. Ride my fingers. That's it. Just keep doing that." I whimpered under his touch.

"Please Tigerclaw. Please, I want you," I whimper and squirm as he massages my clit.

He lifted his head and pulled his hand away. When I looked at him, I could faintly see the beads of sweat forming on his forehead as he panted. I looked at him lovingly, and stared into those deep amber eyes, not regretting anything that had happened. He was mine. I was his. And that's how we will always be.

He brought his hand up and swiped his thumb across my bottom lip. I opened my mouth and he slid his thumb against my tongue. I sucked on his thumb and licked it clean. The salty and metallic tang hit my tongue and I tried not to grimace. He pulled his thumb out and pulled me into a wet kiss.

He pulled away again and brushed a hair away from my face.

"Are you comfortable?" He asks softly.

I nodded, unable to get words out. I look down again and I see him push towards my entrance. I lift my head and ask him worriedly,

"Will it hurt?"

He leans down and kisses my nose. "I'll try and be as gentle as possible,"

I swallow and stare at his concentrated face. He pushes into me slowly and I let out a small gasp. It wasn't entirely painful yet I felt a slight pinch. He stays still as he lets me adjust and kisses me slowly. I nod and murmur, 'I'm okay' when I felt comfortable. Tigerclaw pulls out again and thrusts in.

I dig my nails into his shoulders and grit my teeth. He groans into my hair. I cry out in pleasure as he thrusts again, this time harder and faster. He lifts his head slowly to look at me. I'm sure I look like a mess, but he looked at me with so much love, care, and passion. He does it almost out of despair like he wants the same in return. For someone to love him as he loves them. I start to wonder if somebody had ever loved him until I came along.

I let him know I wasn't afraid of him. Our hips collide together again and I lift my head and kiss his shoulder. I leave a trail of kisses along his collarbone until I reach his heart. I hear its steady rhythm, *thump, thump, thump,* against his chest.

I pull him closer as my hands explore new territories, touching his jaw, lower back, chest, and muscled arms. Tigerclaw closes his eyes slowly, his mouth slightly open from panting. I moan and arch my back as he thrusts again. Over and over, yet I wasn't bored in the slightest. He rocks against me as he grabs my hand and links them together.

I hear him in my mind, taking my soul and body as one.

Never again, my love, he says, *never again shall we leave each other.*

His hand tightens on my hip and I reach my climax, shaking and out of breath. Only a few seconds later that he reaches his. Tigerclaw slows and pulls out of me, kissing me gingerly. I open my eyes and see his staring back at mine.

I give him a small smile and plant a kiss on his lips.

Never again, I vow.

Never again.

A/N

I did as I promised but I'm terrible at updating. I truly am sorry but sometimes motivation to write just isn't there. I can't promise that I'll update as frequently as I and you guys want but I'm trying my best. Thanks for reading so far and I hope you enjoyed this exclusive chapter😉😄 BYIEEEEE